



Series Anthology Books 1-3
THREE PLAYER BOX SETS

three
player
grind 1

usa today bestselling author
allyson lindt

three player grind 1

Books 1-3

Three Player Box Sets

allyson lindt

acelette press

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the roommates

Three Player Grind Book 1

For my eternal dragon

I

daria

I'D SAT in board meetings for some of the wealthiest companies in the world, looked their CEOs in the eye, and told them they were being fucking idiots and would be the reason they're company went under.

And I never broke a sweat.

But I was in a near panic over sending my daughters to Disneyland.

Sure, I sent them to their dad's every weekend, and all four of us had gone to Disneyland together when I was still married to Joe and the girls were younger. But this time he was taking them to the park by himself.

I stood in the middle of the living room, their luggage in front of me, and resisted the urge to check their suitcases a third time, to make sure we hadn't forgotten to pack anything.

Harmony was dancing around me, singing something that had started off as *Bippity, Boppity, Boo*, segued to *A Whole New World*, and was now *Be Our Guest*. She stopped immediately in front of me, eyes wide, and expression somber. "Mom. What if Cinderella isn't there when we go to her castle?"

"Then you'll have to check back later."

“But I’ll be busy later.” Harmony had an entire schedule of where she wanted to go and when, in all the parks. What five-year-old did that?

Mine, apparently. And she’d probably learned it from watching me. “If you ask Alana, she’ll make sure you can move your schedule around, okay?”

Harmony scrunched her face up, then grinned. “Okay.” Before she could start singing again, a car pulled into the driveway. “*Dad’s here,*” she shouted, and ran to the front window.

He was five minutes early. I was impressed. It wasn’t that Joe was specifically irresponsible. The opposite in fact—if work called, all else was second priority.

I liked to think I wasn’t that bad, but there were days I was just as guilty. I was trying, though. My girls deserved one parent who was there for them.

“*Mom.*” Alana’s cry came from upstairs in reply. “I can’t find my navy capris.”

“You already packed them.”

“Not *those*. The other ones.” Alana appeared at the top of the stairs.

Right. I did a quick mental inventory of the house. “Are they in the dryer?”

“Maybe.” She ran into the basement, footsteps heavier than should be possible for a thin thirteen-year-old.

Harmony opened the door as Joe reached the front step, and hugged his legs. “Hi, Daddy.”

He ruffled her hair. “Hey, short stuff. You ready to meet Cinderella?”

“*Yeah.*” Harmony clapped.

He looked at me. “I’m sorry about this.” He wasn’t really.

I’d rearranged my schedule and the girls’ specifically to make sure I could take them to Hawaii this week. I didn’t believe for a moment that it was a coincidence Joe scheduled a Disneyland trip at the same time, especially when he let me know by asking them to pick which one they preferred.

I gave him my sweetest smile anyway. “I understand. The girls are looking forward to it, and I’m glad they have the chance to go.”

“Found them,” Alana said from behind me.

I handed Harmony her backpack. “Take this and help Dad load your stuff into the car.” I nudged the heaviest suitcase toward Joe.

Joe grabbed the bag, and followed Harmony outside.

When they were out of earshot, I turned to Alana. “Promise me you’ll keep an eye on Harmony.”

“Mom. You already know.” Alana huffed.

“Say it anyway. Reassure me you’ll make sure she gets to go on the rides she wants.”

Alana crossed her arms. “What about the rides I want to go on?”

“Make sure Dad lets you go on those too.”

She raised her brows. “So if he’s ignoring us, do I have permission to call him a dickhead?”

It was so tempting. “Don’t call your father a dickhead to his face.” That was a reasonable concession. “And you’re welcome to take his phone and pocket it before you get on

rides, to make sure he's focused on Harmony." How fucked up was it that I trusted my twelve-year-old more than my ex-husband?

Then again, there was a reason he was the ex.

We finished loading up Joe's car, strapped Harmony into her booster seat, and I gave the girls one more round of hugs before forcing myself to send them on their way.

That was one pair on their way. Now I just had to get the next one settled, and then I was jetting off to Hawaii on my own. I already had the vacation set up, no reason to stay at home and mope. While I was gone, Alana's swim coaches would be staying here. Their apartment was being fumigated, they were saving every penny they could, to grow their coaching business, and the arrangement made sense.

An exercise in efficiency. It was a beautiful thing. Though I'd still rather be taking the vacation with my daughters.

I loaded up my own things into my car, and was just finishing when Colin parked in front of the house. Tanner wasn't far behind, taking the second spot in the driveway.

As they climbed out of their vehicles, I knew better than to ogle their well-toned forms. Mostly because I'd had a year or two of practice, and I'd do my staring when they weren't looking. I always felt weird, in a Mrs. Robinson kind of way, objectifying them.

Not that they were kids, but at thirty, they were still nearly a decade younger than me.

"Morning, Ms. Lane," Colin called at the same time Tanner said, "Hey, Daria."

I waved back, never sure which name was more awkward, and nodded at the front door. "Hey guys. Come on in."

As they walked past me, I most definitely drank in an eyeful. They were both dressed in T-shirts and shorts—reasonable, expected, but always a tempting reminder of what they looked like wearing less.

Colin was about six inches taller than my five-six, with broad shoulders, dark hair, and the most adoring brown eyes. I knew from the many times I'd seen him teaching the kids that he had the perfect amount of fuzz on his chest, and deity levels of patience with the students.

Tanner had been an Olympic swimmer, but a torn rotator cuff stopped him from finishing the year he competed, and the injury never healed to the point where he could rejoin the team. He still kept his body mostly hair free, which... *yum*. And he had a piercing blue gaze that made most people crack under it.

There were days when I could convince myself the age difference didn't matter long enough to indulge fantasies about them, but I never managed to forget they were Alana's favorite teachers. A reality that made it easier to keep them as friends and nothing more.

"All right, grand tour." I stopped next to them in the living room. "Our bedrooms are upstairs. Stay out of the girls' rooms unless there's some sort of disaster." I wasn't actually worried about them violating our private spaces, but the checklist was in my head and I was going through it. "You're welcome to use the shower in my room if you need to. You won't run out of hot water, using two at the same time."

I led them into the kitchen. "Help yourself to anything in the fridge and cupboards. Please do, so it doesn't go bad." Two steps down and we were in the sunken family room. I gestured to the two rooms that sat off that. "You can sleep in those."

There's another shared shower. Laundry room, weights, and treadmill are downstairs. Help yourself. My office is down there too, and stays locked for client privacy reasons, and not at all because *you should never go in there.*" I hoped my light sarcasm conveyed the spooky old movie vibe I was going for.

Their laughs said I'd nailed it.

Was the house entirely too big for three people? Yes. But back when my universe revolved around Joe, we had grand visions of this becoming our lifetime home, retiring here, having plenty of room for grandkids...

I'd been so delusional.

"That's that. You can call me if you need me. Any questions?"

"I think we're set. Thank you so much, again, for letting us stay here," Colin said.

"Of course, no problem." Temptation surged through me, to stick around, chat a little longer. Maybe joke.

I had a flight to catch and if I was lucky, I'd hook up with some hottie on the beach while I was gone. Unlikely he'd be the same kind of company Colin and Tanner were, but I was looking for pretty and a good lay, not late-night conversations under the stars.

"Right. Yeah. Call me." I shouldered my laptop and grabbed my purse.

My phone rang. I glanced at the screen. *Work. Fuck.* "Be right back. So I can leave again," I said to the guys.

I wandered into the front foyer as I clicked *Answer.* "This is Daria."

“Thank God I caught you before your flight.” Bernie didn’t sound panicked the way his words implied. He’d known I would still be here.

I swallowed my groan. “Only barely. What can I do for you?”

He was one of the partners who owned the angel investment firm I worked for. He was damn good at his job—investing and making a huge return—but he wasn’t a people person. “Zedophap is having a series of post go-live vendor issues. I need you to give them a call.”

“I’m literally walking out the door to catch a plane.” When I took this job right as Joe and I were divorcing, the thought of telling any of the partners *no* would’ve made me wither and die. I’d had to learn better.

“I need you to take this. If this wasn’t a hundred-million-dollar crisis, I wouldn’t ask.”

Bullshit. “Non-refundable vacation package.”

“I’ll cover the cost myself. And if you pull this off—which you will—there’s a big bonus in it for you.”

Damn it. That kind of money would pay for a better vacation. One I could actually enjoy with my daughters. “Fine. Give me ten minutes to set up my laptop and I’ll call them.”

“Thank you.” Bernie’s gratitude caught me off-guard.

I held my growl until I disconnected, then let it roll out in a long wave of frustration.

“Everything all right?” Colin’s question caught me off guard.

I spun to find him in the doorway, those dark puppy dog eyes watching me with concern.

Right. The other part of this equation was the sexy young studs I'd promised my house to for the next week. How best to phrase this?

2

tanner

I WAS DOING my best not to eavesdrop on Daria's call, despite the growing stress in her voice. But when Colin asked if she was okay, I had to know the answer.

Instead of answering, she was twisting a strand of hair tightly around one finger. It was a rare moment of her looking vulnerable, and that was as sexy as the take-no-shit confidence she normally wore.

A lot of mothers flirted with me, but she was the only one I wished would. I shouldn't be thinking about a student's mom that way, but she was gorgeous, intelligent, had the best dry sense of humor, and I bet she knew exactly what she liked in the bedroom.

"Daria?" I prompted.

She sighed. "My vacation is canceled. I need to use my office for a few hours today, but then I'll grab a hotel and be out of your hair."

Very little of that sentence made sense, but I focused on the least logical part of it. "Why would you get a hotel?"

"Because I promised you two the house for a week."

Was this her version of propriety, or...? I didn't understand. "This is *your* home and it's more than big enough

for the three of us.:"

"I don't—"

"He's right." Colin stopped her. "You let us stay here so we wouldn't have to pay for a place to stay. It's a little ridiculous for you to do so instead if you're not leaving town."

Daria twisted her mouth, tempting me with full, luscious lips. "My office *is* here. It's easier for me to keep working from it."

"Issue resolved." In a best-of-all-worlds kind of way, in my opinion. "Go. Work. We promise to be quiet."

One corner of her mouth tugged up. "This means you'll have to cancel whatever wild parties you had planned." A hint of teasing slid into her voice.

Which meant she was already feeling a little better. Good. I gave an exaggerated sigh. "Damn. I guess I'd better start making calls. Telling everyone the fun is over."

She let out a short laugh. "Seriously. This'll sound weird, but thank you."

"It sounds wrong. You don't have to thank us for sharing your house with you." I loosely grasped her shoulders and pointed her toward the basement. "Go. Work. We'll bring your stuff in from the car and leave it in the foyer."

Did I watch her ass as she walked down the stairs? Damn straight. What she did to a pair of business slacks was incredible, but today I had the added bonus of picturing what she would've looked like lounging on the beach in a two-piece. I dragged my gaze away, and Colin and I headed out to bring her luggage back in, then our own stuff.

Of the two rooms available to us, one had a full bathroom, and the other looked like it was meant to be an office, but a bed had been crammed in the corner. I let Colin have the *real* bedroom. I'd be spending enough time at the pool that I would shower there as often as not.

Speaking of, "I'm going to do some laps before class this afternoon," I said. The *if you want to join me* was implied.

"Cool. I'll catch up with you in a few hours."

Colin's answer didn't surprise or concern me. We both loved swimming, but I had a bit more time invested.

I grabbed my gym bag and headed out. It was mid-morning on a Monday, late enough the commute was over but early enough lunch traffic hadn't started, so my drive was casual and quick. It also meant the private pool where we taught was mostly empty.

Perfect. That would make it easier to push myself without interruption. Eight years ago, I'd been lucky enough to make the Olympic swim team. When I tore my rotator cuff during one of my first races, I was furious at myself for being stupid enough to get hurt.

The injury had healed, but I'd been told I'd never compete at that level again. Four years later, I was so far from making the cut, it wasn't funny. According to all the data, I'd been past my peak then. I didn't care—I was going to make the team this year. This was my last chance to live that dream.

I just had to shave three-quarters of a second off my fifty-meter crawl.

I changed into my suit and rinsed off in the shower before stepping into the main pool area. The scent of chlorine was familiar and oddly soothing, and I inhaled the humid warmth.

The easiest way to check my time when I was alone was with a waterproof camera on a tripod. I set the device up at one end of the lane, took a few deep breaths, then one to hold, and dove in.

When I burst from the water at the other end, I gasped deeply. A quick check of the recording told me I was still missing my goal. I swam the lane again and again, but no matter how hard I pushed, I couldn't shorten my time. In fact, the longer I tried, the more milliseconds I added to the clock.

My bad shoulder was tight and my lungs burned. I stretched to work through the pain. One more try, and I'd have to call it quits and get ready for our first class.

“*Tanner*,” the pool owner's call shattered my focus.

I shook off the irritation at being interrupted, and turned to face John. “Hey.” I kept my smile pleasant. “What's up?”

“I'm not making this public knowledge yet, but since you and Colin have been renting from me for so long, I wanted to give you a heads-up. I'm putting the place on the market, and I can't guarantee the future owners will honor existing contracts.”

I barely heard the last part of his sentence because inspiration lit up my thoughts at *putting the place on the market*. Was this the opportunity Colin and I were waiting for? A chance to own our own pool? Grow our business to something more than a couple of guys offering coaching a few hours a week? “Do you have any offers? What's your asking price?”

“Nah. It's just been listed.” He gave me a dollar amount.

It was a lot, but far less than we'd pay for our own, and we weren't far from having the down payment for a loan like that.

“Thanks for the heads-up.” I wanted to add *I’ll be in touch with you and your agent*, but not until I talked to Colin.

Now was the perfect time to push hard for funding.

And balance that with me getting ready for the Olympic swim trials, which were less than a month away.

But there was plenty of time for both. I was sure of it.

3

colin

I WAS jealous that Tanner insisted Daria stay.

Which was fucked up on *so many* levels. This was her house. Duh, of course she was going to stay here.

And Tanner was my roommate and business partner, so we saw each other more often than we saw anyone else; this week wasn't special, despite it feeling like a mini-vacation.

Besides, it wasn't as though I was going to tell him how I felt, after all this time. I could picture it now, and it went down the same way it had the billion other times I'd imagined my confession.

Hey, Tanner. I love you. As more than a best friend. I'm talking in an I-want-to-be-the-person-sucking-your-cock-for-the-rest-of-our-lives kind of way.

To which imaginary Tanner always replied, *you know I'm straight, right? I'm sorry, man.*

And then things would get awkward.

I'd lived with that specific *daydream* since we were teenagers, which meant no matter how much his imagined response was or wasn't founded in reality, it had become part of my own psychological dogma.

My phone rang and my oldest sister's picture showed on the screen.

"Hey," I answered as I headed into my temporary room.

"Hey. You guys screw on the couch yet?" Brooke's tone was bright

I rolled my eyes, grabbing my laptop bag and setting it on the bed. "Nope. And not on the kitchen counter, or against the wall, or... did I miss anything?"

"Sounds like you're missing out on a lot." She meant the teasing in good fun. No one else knew how I felt about Tanner, and I was grateful she both understood and had never said anything to him.

"Tell me about it." I paused. Having her try to helpfully explain the birds and bees to me when I was ten and she was twenty had scarred me enough I remembered the awkwardness almost two decades later. "On second thought, please don't. Eww."

She laughed. "Seriously though, what's your schedule like this week?"

I pulled my computer out, and set it on the barely big enough nightstand. "Well... our hostess had to cancel her vacation, so I have to cancel the orgies." I let out an exaggerated sigh. "But we're staying here anyway. Otherwise, limited class schedule thanks to summer break, and not a clue besides that."

"Do you want a job?"

I tempered my excitement. *A job* meant a chance to paint murals on someone's wall, which I loved. But the details made all the difference. "Who?"

“Antique shop. You have artistic freedom as long as there’s no blood or genitalia.”

“Are they sure?” My work didn’t tend toward graphic, but a lot of people who said *artistic freedom* didn’t understand that meant mine, not theirs.

“They’re sure. I know the owner, and I promise he’ll love your work. And you.”

The hitch in her voice brought my hesitation back. Out of four older sisters and my parents, she was the only member of my family who still spoke to me. I’d been *shunned* when the rest of them realized I was bisexual. Brooke was not only okay with it, she was forever trying to *help* me get over Tanner. “Are you trying to set me up?”

“No.” She managed to pour a lot of offense into a single syllable. “You’ll take care of that on your own when the sparks fly between the two of you.”

I plugged my laptop in. “I doubt it, but I’ll take the job.”

“Awesome. I’ll send you his info, and let him know you can start... tomorrow morning?”

“Sounds perfect.” After I hung up with her, I finished unpacking enough to be comfortable for the next week, then grabbed my bag to head to the pool.

I changed, rinsed off in the shower, and found Tanner waiting by the water. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other as I approached.

“You need to take a piss?” I asked when I was within hearing range.

He grinned. “Nope. But you’re going to wet yourself when you hear this. I talked to John this morning, and he’s selling

the building.”

I stared blankly at Tanner, not sure what I was supposed to be excited about. It had been hard enough to find this place for us to rent for lessons. “Huzzah?”

“We’re going to buy it.”

Whoa. “What?”

“Not quite the response I expected.” Tanner’s smile dropped, but I knew him well enough to recognize the enthusiasm still raged strong. “This is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for. Sure, it’s a little ahead of our schedule, but we’re so close to being able to nab the place.”

“Unless he’s asking a lot less than market value”—which I couldn’t imagine—“we can’t afford it.”

Now Tanner was frowning. “What’s with the negativity?”

Realism. But that wasn’t the point. “There are tiles missing in the locker rooms, and the HVAC needs some serious work. The rooms in the other building smell like chlorine.” This place was supposed to be a full-blown rec center, but John only focused on the pool. “He’s selling so he doesn’t have to pay to repair it.”

“A brand new place would take work too. Construction. Decisions. Here, we know what to expect.”

I wasn’t sure we did.

“Come on. This is our dream.” Tanner tossed the words out that always made me cave.

Voices bounced around the cavernous room as our first students filtered in. This was our youngest class at five to seven years old, so we only allowed six students into the course. We needed to keep an eye on all of them, but I also

hated turning new enrollments away. Part of growing would mean hiring more coaches.

“It wouldn’t hurt to look more closely into it,” I said.

His grin was back. “Wicked.”

“Mithter Manthell.” The call rang out. The *th* in place of the *s*’s in my name told me who it was, even though the acoustics in here distorted voices.

I turned to see Edward, one of the smaller boys, running toward me, grinning broadly enough to show the gap where his two front teeth were still growing in. I pushed aside my mixed reaction to Tanner’s news, and crouched to bring myself to eye level with Edward. “No running near the pool. What’s up?” I asked. Someday I’d have kids of my own—I’d always wanted a family—but for now, I was content to teach other people’s children.

“I practithed all week. I can do my doggy paddle now.” He’d been struggling with that.

“That’s fantastic.” I moved to the edge of the water and dropped in, gesturing for him to drop in. “Show me.”

For the next hour, we worked with the kids on basic strokes, but just as much we let them have fun. Tanner would require structure from anyone who advanced to higher level classes, but for the beginners, I insisted we keep swimming playful rather than a chore.

The news about the building lingered in my head, as well as my mixed feelings. Why wasn’t I as excited as Tanner? My life had been a lot of drifting from job to job and interest to interest, and nothing had given me stability except this. I loved what we were doing, and we’d been planning this for so long.

This must be trepidation. The kind of uncertainty that came with a dream becoming more real.

The entire situation stayed on a loop in my thoughts as we wrapped up class, and headed back to Daria's. I arrived a moment before Tanner, hesitated at the door, then reminded myself it was okay to walk inside without knocking. We had keys for a reason.

Daria was in the kitchen, and looked up when I walked in. Her friendly smile melted into furrowed eyebrows when she met my gaze. "What's wrong?"

Did she somehow know I was struggling with uncertainty? Tanner hadn't seemed to notice anything.

"Nothing's wrong." Speaking of... He joined us. "In fact, everything's fucking awesome."

"Oh yeah?" She sounded genuinely curious. Then again, most things she did were genuine. One of the things I liked about her was her sincerity. I liked a lot of things about Daria, though. If I weren't so hung up on Tanner, and she weren't a student's parent, I'd entertain a lot of fantasies about her.

Tanner laid out our opportunity to buy the building.

"That's amazing." She smiled warmly. "My offer still stands if you need help with paperwork or another set of eyes on your business proposal."

The grin Tanner gave her was one of those that always made my heart skip. "We may take you up on that, once you're done with your work crisis."

"You know where to find me." She grabbed her coffee mug, and headed downstairs again.

Tanner turned to me. "I'm sorry if I was abrupt earlier."

“You weren’t. This is important, and you’re right—we’ve been planning it for so long.”

His grin was back, turning my insides to mush now that it was focused on me. “I’m not going to just dive into this or move forward without due-diligence. And I’m not doing it without you.”

The words should’ve warmed me further, but they added to an unease I still didn’t feel I’d identified. “Let’s go make plans, then.”

4

daria

DAY one of my non-existent vacation was in the bag.

The girls called when they got back to their hotel, and I could see the pink in Harmony's cheeks. I reminded her to have Alana help her with sunscreen tomorrow, then listened while she told me all about her day. About meeting Cinderella and all the rides she went on and how Daddy won her a giant, pink Minnie Mouse.

Her smile and excitement were contagious, and I couldn't help my grin as she told her story. I was grateful there was no *Daddy is a dickhead* included in the tale.

Alana was smiling just as much. She'd gotten to go on the rides. She saw cute boys and Joe hadn't embarrassed her in front of them, and she had a new swim suit for the water park.

I blew them kisses over Facetime, easily squashed the minuscule bit of disappointment that their dad was showing them a good time while I was stuck working, and wished them both *sweet dreams*.

I should put aside work for the night and relax, but the day's crisis and disappointment had me wound up, even at almost eleven at night. If I put in a little more work, I could

finish things early and maybe get the second half of my week off.

There would be no beaches waiting for me as a reward, but a few days of sleeping in, mimosas, and afternoon reading in the sun sounded like an okay substitute. Not great, but I was looking for the positive in all this.

The scenery in my office—four windowless walls and as many cluttered whiteboards—was tired though. I grabbed my laptop and headed up to the living room. A few minutes later, I had a bottle of beer and a bowl of carrots. I made myself comfortable in my favorite corner of the sectional, and tucked my legs under me, feet to the side.

As long as I kept the sound on the TV low, I shouldn't disturb my guests. Lucky for me, Baywatch was on. No sound required. Was I really watching this just for the pretty people running on the beach?

For the most part.

Did I care?

Nope.

I gave my half-hearted attention to my spreadsheets and frequently glanced at the screen, appreciating the hard bodies.

One of the bedroom doors clicked open. It wasn't a loud sound, but I had years of listening for the same with the girls, and their rooms were a floor higher.

Colin wandered out, and we exchanged friendly smiles and nods. He headed into the kitchen and I tried to turn back to my work. But the real life hard body walking away from me made for a much better view. His shorts hung low on his hips, and hinted at the ass underneath.

He stepped to the other side of the island, cutting off part of the view. When he opened the fridge door, back lighting himself, shadows rolled across his arms with the ripple of muscle. He bent to grab something, completely vanishing for a moment, and I took the opportunity to tear my gaze away.

Whew. So pretty to look at, even if both men were hands-off.

“Do you want anything?” His soft call carried toward me.

You. Naked in front of me. We can figure the details out from there. “I’m good, thanks.” Except I was apparently a lot horny. I had solutions for that upstairs, though.

Colin wandered back into the living room, bottle of water in hand, and took a seat on the couch, not far from my feet. “You’re really dedicated to your work.” He sounded more awed than judgmental.

“It pays the bills. Besides, this is the menial stuff to numb my brain so I can sleep.”

“Same for the TV show? *There* was the hint of judgement.

I didn’t mind. “What? No.” I feigned surprise. “I’m watching this for the *plot*.”

“Hmm.” He furrowed his brow and kept his attention on the TV. “What’s the plot of this episode?”

“That guy there, in the red trunks?” I gestured vaguely. “He’s got to run into the water and save someone. And then there’s some drama. And some more running.”

He still hadn’t taken his gaze off the screen. “In slow motion even.”

“See? You get it.”

Colin shook his head with a laugh. “I guess we all have our guilty pleasures.”

“I don’t feel guilty about this.” I felt guilty about not spending enough time with the girls. About poorly balancing home and work. But not about enjoying *Baywatch*. “I know exactly what I’m watching and why. I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

“Fair point.” Colin was fixated on the screen again.

A creaking that I both heard and felt greeted me when I rolled my neck. I was getting too old for hunching over my laptop on the couch and trying to work. I reached a hand to the spot where my neck met my shoulder, and rubbed, wincing at the ache that pulsed in the muscle.

“Let me,” Colin said.

Before I could decide if it was inappropriate to let him, he had his hands on my shoulders and his thumbs digging into the muscles at the base of my neck. “You’re so tight,” he said.

I was grateful for my moan at his skilled touch because it kept me from snickering at his words. *God* that felt good. The longer he massaged, the more my tension faded away. I dipped my head forward and let my hair fall around my face.

”You’re amazing.” The words came out breathier than I intended.

“I have a lot of practice, especially from Tanner’s injury.”

I’d seen the way he watched Tanner—it was impossible to miss. It was also pretty obvious Tanner had no idea he felt the same way. Clueless men. Good new fantasy, though. My mind liked the idea of watching both of them, either with me or the two of them alone. The way Colin dug his fingers into my skin helped fuel the desire dancing over my skin.

How long was it appropriate to let him keep doing this?

The other bedroom door creaked open. The instant Tanner stepped into the room, Colin's hands dropped away.

Tanner didn't look fazed. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Nope. Nothing at all," Colin's answer came too quickly.

I didn't appreciate that he sounded embarrassed, almost guilty, but I also knew why. Poor guy was going to spend a lot of time miserable if he didn't either tell Tanner how he felt or decide to move on.

5

daria

MY DREAMS WERE FILLED with an odd blend of shadowy, threatening figures, and shadowy, sexy figures.

The sexy dreams woke me up, heat spilling through me and need throbbing between my legs. Now that I was conscious, last night raced back to join it—Colin’s skilled fingers on my neck and shoulders. His incredible voice. That spark of want that Tanner would join us instead of breaking up the party.

Bad idea in real life, but perfect in my fantasies.

I made a straight line to my dresser, and the hidden box at the back of the top drawer. I could use my fingers, or the shower head by itself, but I wanted to be filled up by a thick, long cock.

When Joe and I separated, I went out with—fucked—everyone. Words of affirmation were one hundred percent my love language. Praise fed me, and Joe had left me starving. If a guy cupped my face, looked me in the eye, and told me I was smart and funny and pretty, I’d let him stick his dick anywhere.

The experience taught me junk food was amazing in the moment, but ultimately unsatisfying, and I’d swapped out

fucking around for a latex, and battery powered assortment of toys. They didn't praise me, but the faceless younger men in my imagination, who may or may not be built like swimmers, would do plenty of that.

I grabbed a small bottle of lube from the top shelf in the medicine cabinet, though I didn't think I'd need it. As I stripped out of the battered, oversized *They Might be Giants* shirt and granny panties I'd slept in, and turned on the water in the shower, the fantasy was already building. It started just like last night—Colin massaging the kinks from my neck.

There was a fold down seat attached to the wall. It was meant for me to sit on while I shaved my legs, but this morning, the smooth surface was perfect for me to suction cup a dildo to. That was the main course though, and I was still enjoying the appetizer.

I stepped under the water and let the heat wash around and through me. In my fantasy of last night, Colin glided his hands lower as he massaged, slipping under my shirt to cup my breasts and tease. I followed a similar path in reality, letting my soapy palms slip along my skin. As I imagined him rolling my nipples between his fingers, I did the same.

When Tanner stepped out of his room, this time Colin didn't pull his hands away. He pinched harder, sending fissures of delight through me to pool in my belly and travel lower.

Tanner grinned. "This looks cozy. Is there room for one more?"

In my mind, I squirmed on the couch in anticipation and nodded. In the shower I glided my fingers between my legs, but didn't part my folds. My skin was hot and slick and I wasn't ready for the fantasy to be over.

Tanner knelt between my legs and stripped off my bottoms, while Colin glided his lips along the back of my neck, never letting up the attention on my breasts.

Tanner kissed up my upper thighs, sucking then nipping enough to make me gasp, before finally gliding his tongue along my pussy. *Fuck* he knew what he was doing. Where to lick, how to hook his fingers just right inside me, and every muffled murmur of *you taste so good* and *God, I love the sounds you make* amplified my arousal.

And then, because it was imaginary, we were magically on the bed in Tanner's guest room. It was a full-sized bed, not meant for two people let alone three, but we didn't care.

Colin felt incredible, buried inside me as I straddled him, and Tanner was just as intensely amazing sliding into my ass from behind.

I needed that sensation of being filled to be real. I lowered myself onto the dildo, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from moaning too loudly as it stretched me out. Fantasy blended with real sensations as I rode the toy, imagining them hammering inside me hard and fast.

I slipped my fingers between my legs to tease my swollen clit. I was so turned on, so embedded in the daydream, that orgasm spilled through me at my touch. This felt so good, I didn't want it to stop. I fucked and fingered myself until another climax crashed over me, and finally slowed to a stop. My breath came in short gasps and my pulse hammered in my ears.

Imaginary-me collapsed on Colin's chest. The guys softened and slid out of me, Colin trailing his fingers through my hair, and Tanner murmuring, "You're so beautiful."

Water sluiced around me, slowly drawing me back to reality, but not taking away the orgasms.

So. Good.

Not the real thing, but I was satisfied with the outcome.

I finished my shower, tiny reminders shivering through me every time my hands drifted between my legs, and forced myself to get out before I spent the whole morning in here.

I wiped the steam from the bathroom mirror, and a flushed reflection stared back at me. The red in my cheeks was as much from the fun daydream and orgasm as it was from the hot water.

My work schedule today was mostly phone calls, emails, and administrative work. I didn't have any video conferences scheduled, and that usually meant I'd tug my hair into a ponytail, toss on whatever, and be done with it.

But I wanted to feel stunning, even if no one saw me but me. I took the time to dry my hair enough that that natural wave would stay when I worked product into the curls, and grabbed my favorite shade of lipstick—the burgundy color that made me look incredible. The color I hadn't worn since I stopped fucking around.

I opened the tube and a squashed lumpy stump of nothing laughed at me. One of the girls must have gotten to it before me. At least they enjoyed it rather than it going to waste. I'd have to make do with lip gloss and mascara.

My favorite matching bra and panty set—burgundy satin and lace like the non-existent lipstick—came out of retirement. I didn't care that no one else would see it; putting it on made me feel extra sexy.

The entire look was topped off with a blouse that was probably a shade too thin for me to be wearing dark lingerie under it, and the capris I knew for a fact made my ass look good. There was nothing wrong with a pair of amazing mom jeans when they were comfortable and complimentary.

Now to take my gorgeous self and sit in a basement all day where no one would see me. The thought should have been depressing, but it made me laugh.

I opened the bedroom door and pulled up short at the sight of Tanner, hand frozen in midair as if he'd been about to knock.

His gaze froze too, right on my chest.

Heat flooded my face. "Can I help you?"

He shook his head and forced his attention up, to look me in the eye. "You look incredible."

Fuck me, please? The whimper echoed in my head, and I forced it aside. "Thank you."

"But I bet you have to get to work." He gave a light cough and the mood shattered. Mostly. "I have a last-minute appointment with a loan officer, and I need to be there in an hour. Colin's in the bathroom downstairs getting ready for a mural job. May I use yours?"

"Of course." I stepped aside.

I left him alone in my bedroom, while my apparently-not-sated hormones screamed at me to go back and jump him. Down girl. Fantasies and daydreams were enough for me. Especially when it came to Alana's coaches.

The thought didn't carry as much weight as it had in the past, and I had to force it to repeat like a scratched CD while I

started work.

6

colin

I HATED the uneasy feeling in my gut that said Tanner *caught* me last night. Doing what? Shoulder rubs for Daria? Big fucking deal. Nothing I hadn't done for him thousands of times, and that never meant anything.

Or maybe that was the problem. It always meant something to me. The contact and closeness whenever I helped Tanner work out tight muscles. The soft grunts he made. The fact that last night, massaging Daria's neck left that same light, giddy feeling rushing through me.

And I wanted to think when Tanner saw us, a hint of uncertainty and hesitation splashed across his face. But I didn't know if that was true or if I just wanted it to be.

I emerged from my room, ready for work, and was surprised to see Tanner's door open and him not there. Maybe he went to the pool early. Not usually his thing, but he was pushing harder than he should be for the qualifying trials.

My appointment with Deacon wasn't for another hour. If I got there early though, I could grab a coffee on my way there and spend some time checking the place out. I'd skip breakfast, since we were on a budget, but I always had a couple extra bucks for coffee.

At the creak of a door and footsteps on the stairs, I looked up ready with a smile for Daria, and my throat went dry at the sight of Tanner coming down the stairs, hair damp, and wearing his *make an impression* clothes. The shirt that might be a size too small, but it didn't matter because it showed off how incredibly defined his chest and arms were. The slacks that made his ass look amazing. The outfit he'd brought *just in case* that I teased him for thinking he'd need.

Seeing him like this wasn't new, but seeing him come out of Daria's room freshly showered sent an unreasonable wave of assumption and jealousy coursing through me.

"Hey, I'm glad I caught you." His light tone was enough to jerk me back to *you see him every day, chill the fuck out*.

I returned his smile. "What's up?"

"I landed an early appointment with a small business loan officer. He's going to review our business plan and such. It's not an official application, but I should come away with some pointers and an idea of if we're still on the right track."

"That's awesome." My hesitation from yesterday had vanished, and his enthusiasm was infectious this morning.

His grin spread. "It really is. I'll take lots of notes. You free tonight if we need to make changes?"

"Sure."

"Epic. I'll catch you this afternoon." Tanner turned away.

"About last night." The words slipped out before I could stop them, and I winced, hiding the expression before he looked at me.

Tanner raised his brows. "Which part?"

“With Daria.” Stop talking. Shut up. But it was too late. Not finishing the thought would make things worse. “There was nothing going on.”

Tanner’s easy chuckle sliced through me. “I get it. She’s fun to hang with, she’s smokin’ hot, and I don’t see her pulling Alana from classes or kicking us out over a neck rub, so it’s all good.”

“Right. Catch you later.”

He waved and headed outside.

I slouched, resting my weight against the counter behind me. Why was I doing this to myself? A hint of pain in the bedroom was fun, but I’d never thought of myself as a masochist. But poking and prodding Tanner day after day to see if he felt more for me than friendship, and continually being let down, was me torturing myself.

Work called, and supposedly I got to design today. Losing myself in a mural would be the perfect way to reset my mind.

The antique shop was nestled with other small businesses on Main Street of the small town where Brooke lived. It was a bit of a drive to get here, but it wasn’t too bad considering how isolated the place felt.

The limited on street parking made it difficult to get a spot near their awning covered entrances. There was plenty of time for a stroll, so I grabbed a spot a few blocks away. I slung my briefcase containing a giant sketchpad over my shoulder, and after a short pause to grab coffee, I stepped through the doors of Deacon’s Derelicts and D’art.

That was a lot of *Ds*, and with any luck, he was the kind of guy who would snicker at that statement as much as I was.

Inside, a corridor of display cases lined an entryway, and led to the main store. Behind the glass were assorted knickknacks of pop culture memorabilia—a Scooby Doo lunchbox, an A&W glass mug, and an assortment of decorative shaped tins ranging from trains to bears.

When I reached the main shop, a vast space spread out in front of me that defied how big this place should be, based on outside appearances. I'd walked into a TARDIS of a shop, decorated with Ds. What a glorious day.

“Colin?” A deep, rolling voice drew my attention.

I turned to find a man standing a few feet away, watching me with piercing green eyes, his dirty blond hair pulled into a bun on the top of his head. He was cute. Not drop my coffee to swoon cute, and in the beige tank top and khakis, probably more Brooke's type than mine. “You must be Deacon.”

“I'll be whoever you're looking for.” He winced as he extended his hand. “That was awful, wasn't it?”

When I shook his hand his grip was firm and warm. I didn't know if I wanted the feeling to do something for me or not, but it didn't. “It wasn't great.” I kept my tone light. It would be easy to take the line and run with it. Something like *but it was cute*. I couldn't push out the words, though. “But I've heard a lot worse, so I won't hold it against you,” I teased. “I know I'm early, so don't feel like you need to drop everything because I'm here.”

“I am *super* busy right now.” He cast his gaze around the shop with a faint smile.

The place was full... of furniture, fixtures, art, and I was pretty sure that was a battered shield in the corner next to a spear. But there were no other people. “I can see that.”

“I’ll make time for you, though.” He gestured toward the far wall, which was currently covered with painted recreations of kitsch. Like a sports bar, but not real objects. “I had someone do that about six months ago, I gave them artistic freedom and they gave me Coca-Cola logos. According to Brooke, you can do better.”

“I can do different. Better is a matter of opinion. But yeah, I can do better.”

“I’m already sold. How does this work? Do you keep your paints in your magic sack?”

I shook my head with a smile. “I’ll sketch out a concept, if you like what you see, there’s a fifty percent deposit”—which would pay for the paints, so I wasn’t out that cost if for some reason a client didn’t finish paying—“and I start work tomorrow.”

“And I get to watch you work?”

Heat flooded my face. The blatant flirting was nice, but I didn’t know how to rebuff it politely. Why couldn’t I get this from Tanner?

Why was I so hung up on him? After all this time, he wasn’t going to see me as more than a friend, and I wasn’t going to push the issue. If I could move on, so many more opportunities would open up for me. Someone like Deacon. Hell, even someone like Daria—sweet, funny, a fantastic mom whose kids I adored....

That was it, I was done swooning over Tanner. Obviously easier said than done, but I was cutting myself off from the fantasy. It wasn’t doing me or him or our friendship any favors, and it was certainly hurting my dating life.

tanner

I WAS USED to hearing *yes*, so I was confident about this morning's meeting.

But the entire drive to the bank, rather than staying focused on the facts of our business proposal, my mind bounced between two distractions. Seeing a bottle of lube near the bathroom sink and that dildo in Daria's shower, suction cupped in place, still glistening with drops of water, had me picturing her riding it. Riding me.

And she was flushed and smiling shyly in my fantasy, exactly the way she had when I talked to her in the doorway.

I pushed the thought aside as best I could. Walking into an appointment with a hardon made a supremely bad impression.

Which was when Colin slid into my head, carried on last night, and the associated whisper that I wouldn't have minded being a part of whatever I'd walked in on, and making it more. With her. Hell, even with him there.

And that left me thinking about Colin. Kind, thoughtful, brilliant, bizarrely single despite having double the options open to him...

He'd been off since we got to Daria's and I didn't know why. He was more than a roommate or best friend or business

partner—Colin was my anchor. He'd helped me through my injury and I could always count on him. I wouldn't want to go into this venture without him.

When I was done here, I'd do something to cheer him up, and get him to tell me what was wrong.

I pulled into the bank parking lot, and a lifetime of training for the public eye kicked in. I wiped any other thoughts from my mind like sweeping off a table to use it for fuc—

Nope. I was focused on the meeting.

The woman working the front desk gave me a broad smile and leaned in as I approached. "May I help you?"

I could flirt. Get her number. But I couldn't stop thinking about someone a little older who I already knew was great company. "Tanner Hagen. I have an appointment with Mr. Davenport."

"From the Olympics?" Her face lit up brighter.

Not for a while, but I would be again. "That's me."

"We watched you in gym class, sophomore year. I felt so bad when you got hurt."

"Thanks. Can I go up?"

"I'll let Mr. Davenport know you're here."

I kept my smile in place, but something inside wilted. I wouldn't do the math to figure out how much younger that made her. Did Daria feel like this talking to me?

And what was my hang-up today? So I saw her dildo, and now I couldn't get her out of my head? Maybe today was the perfect day to indulge a fantasy and hook up with her. Get the

urge out of my system, and see what that dark bra looked like when I stripped her top off...

“Mr. Davenport will see you.” The receptionist interrupted my wandering thoughts.

Which was good. I stood, told my dick *down boy*, and headed toward his office.

I’d talked to Davenport a couple of times already. He was part of a program that offered free consultation to small business owners and start-ups. The option to buy an existing building changed so many things. I wanted to get his opinion on the deal, and since he worked for one of the local banks, I was hoping to catch his eye and have him offer to move to the next steps of the loan process. Or at least give me a referral to a colleague.

He greeted me with a handshake, we chatted about the weather for a few minutes, and then I launched into my pitch.

The basics hadn’t changed much. We currently taught swimming lessons to kids from five to eighteen, and we wanted to expand our operations. Bring on more coaches, put ourselves in a building we owned, that provided a place for families to swim when classes weren’t in session, and even provide more adult classes like water aerobics.

I pointed to profit and loss history and projections. Experience. The power of my name as a brand and a selling point...

“And we always come back to the same thing,” he said. “You need a large chunk of land and a lot of money to build something like this. You said the situation had changed?”

“It has.” I’d printed the real estate listing for the building we were in now, grabbed specs, floor plans, and everything I

could think of. I flipped to that new information now. “We have the opportunity to purchase an existing structure.”

Davenport’s brows knitted together.

That wasn’t right.

“I’m familiar with the property.” His cheer vanished behind a flat tone. “More specifically, I’m familiar with the disrepair most of it is in.”

My enthusiasm dipped a notch, but I didn’t let the reaction show. “Nothing structural, though.” I hoped. Please don’t let the place have the kind of issues that would require tearing it down. “I realize it needs more than a fresh coat of paint”—I flipped to another new section of the plan—“but you’ll see here we also have plans to renovate the rest of the building. Bring the classrooms back up, the gym, and put other activities in place.”

Colin had some brilliant ideas around restoration and rebuilding. He’d even provided some preliminary sketches. One of the best things about talking to him about this part of the plan was the way his face lit up when he went into detail about what he’d do, given the chance. Colin inspired and embracing his muse was a beautiful sight.

Davenport placed his hand on the pages of my business proposal before I could flip to Colin’s concepts. “Managing and maintaining a rec center is a very different idea than running a swim school and pool. You were already looking at costly insurance, utilities, and upkeep. This adds new layers to all of it.”

“I understand that, but—”

“Do you?” He met my gaze and held it. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do and why. You’ve put together a fantastic

business plan since we started speaking. However, with these new ideas you can't just slap a few pages in the middle of your proposal and call it done. Especially when you're looking at a dilapidated piece of property that no bank is going to give you a loan for."

I didn't appreciate being cut off or talked down to. "You're missing the vast opportunity here."

"I assure you, I'm not." He stood. "Take some time to think about what I've said." He stepped around the desk, to the door, and held it open. "And enjoy the rest of your day."

What just happened? "I'll rework the proposal to include the rec center, and we'll talk again in a week or so." I stood and gathered my things, but I wasn't leaving on this note. "Should I schedule with the girl up front or drop you an email?"

Davenport shook his head. "Lose this building and-slash-or come back with fifty percent down, and you'll find a lot of doors open up. Regardless, lose the rec center idea."

My thoughts were stuck in a loop. I didn't know how to deal with the brush off, and I wanted to argue and tell him how wrong he was. However, I refused to let him see me upset or give the impression of begging. "Thank you for your time. I won't be scheduling future meetings."

"I understand."

I didn't. As I walked back to the parking lot, I tried to figure out how any of this made sense. My idea, the proposal, was brilliant. His point about updating the P&L was a good one, but nothing else he'd said rang true.

I climbed into my car, disbelief spinning toward anger. It was time to stop piddling around with consultations from a

man who was looking for reasons to say *no*. A few tweaks this afternoon, and I was going directly to bankers. Fuck him and his bullshit brush-off.

Next steps spun through my head as I headed back to Daria's. I'd let Colin go full-force on redesign ideas. We'd make this entire concept leap off the page.

This route was unfamiliar, and as I drove, I vaguely registered the new scenery. Mostly small local places I hadn't seen before that looked like I might want to visit later. A sign with a stunning hand-painted script caught my eye. It was advertising high end drawing pens on clearance.

Colin had been eyeing those for a long time, putting it off because we were being frugal. I made a hard right into the parking lot, and a short while later emerged with the new gift in hand. The pens weren't as cheap as I'd hoped, but I could suck it up financially for a few weeks. Seeing him smile would be worth it.

Plus, if he didn't know this place was here, I'd need to bring him by.

Excitement at the idea of brightening Colin's day blended strangely with my frustration, and by the time I parked in Daria's driveway, unspent energy thrummed inside, screaming for a physical outlet.

I could head back to the pool, but I wasn't in the mood to spend more time in the car first. I could throw on a pair of shorts and go for a run.

The light clang of dishes caught my attention as I walked through the front door, and I followed the noise to find Daria in the kitchen. Her back was to me, and her dark hair fell in loose waves around her shoulders, begging to be pulled...

New plan. I'd engage her help to burn off this excess adrenaline. "Lunchtime?"

She jumped and whirled to face me. "Fuck, you startled me." Her shaky laugh was the perfect complement to the pink spreading across her cheeks. "And yes, I was thinking about it."

"Not sure if you have something specific in mind, but I have a suggestion for something delicious if you'd like some company."

"What are you thinking?" Daria asked.

"You."

Her snort-laugh, and the way she cut it off by clamping her mouth shut, was the last response I expected.

Sure, I'd come on a bit strong, but direct tended to be the best way to let someone know *Hey, I'd like to fuck you*. "There's no way I'm that unappealing." I kept my tone light.

Her smile was shy and she didn't meet my gaze. "It's not... You're not... I'm sorry." She looked up. "The laugh was more of an *I didn't expect that* noise. I was leaning toward grilled cheese if you'd like one too."

Smoothest brush-off ever. At least she didn't offer me a PB&J with the crust cut off.

Was it wrong that I thought it was sexy that her default for food was making traditionally for-kids food? Hell, the fact that she was such a great parent in general was sexy. "Grilled cheese sounds great."

Sure, she'd brushed me off, and changed the topic so quickly she never missed a beat, but I hadn't been shut down.

Still, my ego limped along, not sure what to make of the day of *nos*.

8

daria

I PROBABLY SHOULDN'T HAVE LAUGHED when Tanner propositioned me. His approach was smoother than anything my imagination would've come up with.

It was also way too *cheesy porn* for me to take it seriously.

I couldn't bring myself to say *yes*, but I also didn't want to tell him *no* and completely remove the option. The line was bad, but I liked being called *delicious* and he was yummier in person than in my fantasies. Basically, I didn't want to completely discourage him.

So, being the dork I was, I'd offered him a sandwich instead. Go me. I wanted to pretend this was no big deal, but it was easier to focus on the cooking than looking at Tanner or trying to make conversation.

"Can I help with anything?" He hadn't left. That had to be a good sign.

The offer was kind. The thought of working shoulder to shoulder with him heated my skin. "You can load the dishwasher after, but I've got it, thanks." Besides, I had this down to a science. Heat the electric griddle while I got out the supplies. Mayo on the outside of the bread, cheese in the

middle, drop two sandwiches on right as the surface was the right temperature.

Easy peasy.

“How did things go at the bank?” I asked as the food cooked.

“Not great. Not yet.”

A corner of my mouth tugged up at the confidence. That was sexy. “Yet?”

“It wasn’t a *no* and I’m willing to modify my proposal for a *yes*.”

He was still talking about the bank, wasn’t he? Or was he talking about me?

Nah.

When I glanced over my shoulder, he pulled his gaze up from where it would’ve been focused on my ass, and grinned.

Maybe he was talking about me. The flutters in my stomach liked that idea.

“Give me details. You can’t drop a vague answer like that and then just leave it.” I was talking about the business proposal, but I wouldn’t mind if he interpreted my words differently.

“The building’s not in the best shape, and the business plan doesn’t allow for some of the new costs involved, but Colin has some great ideas, and I can revise the budget.”

Business it was, then. I didn’t have a right to be disappointed—I brought it on. I dished the sandwiches onto two plates, cut them in half diagonally, and set the food on the

counter dividing the kitchen from the dining room. One dish in front of Tanner and the stool he sat on, and one for me.

“Do you want to sit?” he asked.

The thought hadn't even occurred to me. “Actually, I have to get back to work.” I didn't want to. Especially with this sexy guy watching me with rapt attention, and the potential for the conversation to get playful again, but I hadn't intended to walk away from my desk for long.

“I get it.” Disappointment whispered through Tanner's reply. “Don't work too hard, and thanks for lunch.”

I gave him a faint smile, grabbed my food, and headed back to my *dungeon* under the house.

What would've happened if I'd said *okay* when he said he wanted me for lunch? We'd probably be fucking right now. The visuals played off my fantasy from this morning, splashing a whole new layer of vibrance and heat across the images in my mind.

As I settled at my desk, Colin flitted back into my thoughts. In a sexy, let's-have-a-threesome kind of way, but also in a he-was-completely-obsessed-with-Tanner kind of way. Colin's reaction last night, when Tanner saw him giving me a neck rub, was the strongest evidence I'd seen yet, but the attraction was anything but subtle.

I was also pretty sure it didn't go both ways. At least, not that Tanner had admitted to himself.

Which wouldn't stop me from feeling guilty if I hooked up with Tanner. Yeah, I was pretty sure he fucked around a lot, and that Colin expected it, but I doubted any of those women knew what kind of relationship they had.

Sometimes being able to get an intuitive read on people sucked.

I nibbled on my sandwich and dove back into work, firing off an email to one of the senior partners asking for additional information, then turning to the next item on my to-do list.

My phone rang, and the name *Kandace Newton* flashed on screen. The woman I'd just reached out to.

"This is Daria." I slid into my sweet-but-take-no-shit professional voice without pause.

"It certainly is. I'd hoped when I saw your name in my inbox it was a fluke. What the hell are you doing working?" Kandace's tone was light, despite the admonishment. "You're supposed to be in Hawaii."

I swallowed my sigh at the reminder. Hawaii would be so much less complicated. Fresh memories of Colin and Tanner, both shirtless and dripping wet from climbing out of the pool, popped into my head.

The company may not be as good somewhere else, though.

"Last minute client emergency," I said. "My plans were already off-kilter, so I said yes."

Her *hmm* sounded a bit like a growl. "Bernie?"

I didn't want to sic the senior partners on each other but lying or ignoring the question wasn't smart either. "Yes."

She clucked. "Ridiculous. Finish your day and take the rest of the week off. This is your vacation."

"But—" I clenched my jaw. I appreciated the sentiment, but I also had work to do now that I was here.

“That’s an order. I’ll take care of him, and you’ll get paid whatever he promised you. Understand?”

I almost smiled at her stern tone. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll send you over the information you’re asking for, but don’t let me hear a peep from you after today. Not until next Monday.”

How was I supposed to argue with that? “Understood.”

I turned my attention to my laptop.

What if I could nudge Colin and Tanner together?

The question came out of nowhere and now that it was in my head, I didn’t want to ignore it.

Not as in just the two of them. Not at first. More like, I could have my sexy threesome and they could have a taste of each other at the same time I did.

A hookup like that could be bad for a friendship. I was horrible for even considering it beyond a fantasy level. I mean... unless all three of us agreed it was no big deal.

It would be for Colin, no matter what. I couldn’t pretend otherwise.

But what if it became more for Tanner, too? He had stories from the Olympic campus of threesomes. Of rampant fucking and basically orgies. Not the kind of thing he shared during class, but he’d boasted more than once when only the adults were around.

I tried to push the idea aside, but it lingered through the rest of the workday, still teasing and tempting me as I set my *Out of Office* notifications and shut everything down.

My phone rang, FaceTime from the girls. Hearing from them made me smile, but getting the call so early in the day made me suspicious.

They were still having a blast though. Harmony needed to be wearing more sunscreen, based on how pink her cheeks were, but they were both excited for dinner with Mickey tonight. I blew them kisses, sent them on their way, and headed upstairs.

When I reached the main floor, Tanner was in the dining room, laptop in front of him, typing away.

Hey, what if all three of us fucked? The question bounced in my thoughts.

No way was I saying that. “I’m getting a beer, do you want one?” I headed for the fridge and grabbed two bottles.

“Not apple juice in a sippy cup?” Tanner’s teasing question hit my back.

I pressed cold glass to the inside of my wrist to sap away some of the heat flooding me. Nope, didn’t work. I took a seat next to him at the table instead, and slid him one of the bottles. “If that’s your kink...”

“My kink is making a gorgeous woman scream in the bedroom.” He closed his laptop, took the bottle opener from me, and popped the top on both drinks.

God in heaven help me. It was such a cocky response, and the way he delivered it with zero hesitation had my pulse racing. I took a long swallow of my beer, measuring my reply. “Let’s be honest, that’s most men’s kink.”

“Not from what I’ve heard.” He smirked. “It’s my understanding a lot of guys are only focused on getting themselves in, off, and out.”

“Touché.”

“What makes you scream in the bedroom?” He didn’t miss a beat, did he?

And I wasn’t a doe-eyed fangirl in a bar, no matter how much my body was reacting to the fact his arm settled next to mine, sending heat spilling between us. Attraction and fantasy were nice, but the stubborn part of me wasn’t doing this—whatever *this* was—unless I was fully convinced. “Dirty socks on the floor directly next to the clothes hamper.”

“Fair point.” His smirk became a chuckle. “But seriously for a moment.”

This was fun. How was this fun? “I’ll try.”

“Your actual kink?”

My response stuck in my throat as I wavered between giving him a version of the truth and tugging up another diversionary response.

“Long work hours. Never slowing down. I bet you’re a masochist,” Tanner said.

“Nope.” I popped the *p*. “To each their own, but for me, there’s enough pain in the world already. A little light spanking and hair pulling is the extent of the sting I’m looking for. I want to be pampered in the bedroom. You?”

He glided his fingers lightly along the back of my neck and I couldn’t suppress my gasp at the shudder of desire his touch elicited.

“Wrapping a woman’s hair around my fingers”—he knotted his hand lightly in my curls—“looking her in the eye”—he held my gaze—“and telling you what a gorgeous girl you are while I glide my cock into your mouth.”

My breath caught and my anticipation spiked. I stopped the *yes please* from whimpering past my lips. “That’s only sexy depending on what comes before and after.” The shift in pronouns hadn’t escaped me either.

“Before? You. After? You again, but hopefully both of us.” Tanner let go of my hair, brushing his fingers over my cheek as his hand fell back to the table.

Part of me was fully aware he could be saying whatever it took to get me into bed. A much louder part was absolutely into and turned on by this conversation. “The *you* in this case being a singular and unspecified entity.”

“The *you* in this case being *you*.” His gaze never left mine.

This wasn’t working. Sure, the attention was amazing, and yes, my body was begging for what he was offering, but I couldn’t make myself suspend disbelief. I wrapped my hands around my beer, to keep myself from fidgeting. “Where is this coming from?”

“I don’t understand.”

That was my line. I didn’t understand what either of us was doing. “Don’t take my question the wrong way, you talk a good game. But... it came out of nowhere.” There it was—the root of my biggest hesitation. I got along great with both guys, trusted them, it was why they were in my home. And yes, I’d drooled and fantasized and probably—definitely—lightly flirted on more than one occasion. Especially with Tanner; he made it easy.

But this? It was as if someone had flipped Tanner’s *horny* switch and he homed in on the nearest body.

He raked his fingers through his hair and exhaled noisily.

Damn it, that flash of insecurity made him even more attractive. But I still wanted an answer.

The familiar sound of the deadbolt on the front door unlocking made my heart seize, and Colin walked in.

All my curiosity about threesomes rushed back, carrying my reservations about coming between Colin and Tanner along with it.

9

colin

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET. This time of the evening was Daria still working? She'd looked so good doing so last night on the couch. Relaxed. Those soft moans.

It needed to be okay for me to look at others that way who weren't Tanner. To admit I was attracted to other people. Maybe not a student's parent and our temporary landlord, but I really couldn't think of a better starting point.

I headed toward the basement, startled to find Daria and Tanner sitting at the kitchen table, not saying anything and not doing much of anything either.

"Did I interrupt something?" This was awkward.

"I was just asking when you both ate, and if now was too early." Did Daria's voice just waver?

I pulled out a chair and made myself comfortable. "Don't stop on my account. Hell, mind if I watch?" What was I doing? Deciding not to fixate on Tanner didn't mean it was a good time to channel him.

"I don't usually do things for an audience, but there's a first time for everything," Daria said.

Tanner grinned. "I do everything for an audience." Despite the expression, his voice was missing a lilt.

“When you say eating, you’re being literal, not metaphorical?” Oh, God. Did I really just say that? I’d been watching Tanner *way* too long. “You know what, I’m done. I must have picked up some attitude at work.” I laughed, hoping to take the edge off my temporary weirdness.

“*I* was being literal.” Did Daria relax when she spoke? “We plan meals around our schedules, so I don’t remember when normal people have dinner anymore.”

“Whenever.” I shrugged.

She glanced at Tanner, who made a similar gesture.

He’d gone quiet fast. What did I actually walk into?

“I was thinking Chinese. What do you both like?” Daria grabbed her phone. “It’s on me, so no excuses.”

“We can’t let you—”

She held up a hand, silencing me. “No excuses. Sweet and sour? Pot stickers? Noodles?”

“Schezwan beef, sesame chicken, ham fried rice.” Tanner was back.

Or I’d imagined his silence as being anything other than there. “He nailed it,” I said.

Daria placed the order and disconnected.

“Oh.” Tanner shot up from his seat as if he’d been shocked. He pointed at me. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

“And I was going to run out to the moon,” I teased. What did that even mean?

Daria’s laugh was light and natural. She was really pretty when she was relaxed. She was pretty regardless, but this was

a side of her I rarely saw. What else had I been missing by focusing so much on Tanner?

“Here.” Tanner set a rectangle wrapped in several plastic bags in front of me, and took his seat again. “Happy unbirthday. No give backs.” His easy smirk was back.

Not that I was paying that much attention. The shape and rattle of the present were familiar, but there was no way. I unwrapped the gift, my heart sinking and soaring simultaneously when I saw a familiar logo. It was really the hundreds of dollars pen set I’d been eyeing for ages. “I—”

“Shh...” Tanner pressed a finger to my lips. “Unless you’re about to say *thank you* or *these are the wrong ones*—which they’re not—I don’t want to hear it.”

I smiled and pulled away from his touch before it could scorch my soul. I could argue cost, ask what the occasion was, or half a dozen other things, but sometimes Tanner did random things like this, and he knew his budget. “They’re perfect, thank you.”

Was it just me or was this a little awkward? The three of us sitting around the table, staring at our fingers. I grabbed Tanner’s beer and took a long drag off the bottle. Still cold. “Oh, this is good.” I pulled it back to check the label. “Strawberry ale?”

“I’m a girl drink drunk.” Daria grinned. “If I have to keep beer in the fridge, it needs not taste like old socks.”

“Do you? Have to, I mean,” I asked.

Daria furrowed her brows. “No one’s forcing me to, but I had some left over from a cookout a few weeks ago, and tonight seemed like a good night to finish it off. There’s one bottle left if you want it.”

“I’m good, thanks.” It was tempting to drink a little, loosen up a little, and just let go, but one beer plus Chinese food wouldn’t do that, and if it did, the last thing I needed tonight was a reason to question my resolve to relegate Tanner to *friends for life* column. Yup, I was friend-zoning myself.

The small talk bounced from Tanner’s time trials to Daria suddenly having the rest of the week off, and even paused on my day, but I was so focused on not paying attention to Tanner, that most of the conversation floated past me.

Pretty sure there was a parallel between that and the last however long of my life.

As we finished eating, Daria started to gather plates and close up boxes.

I grabbed her wrist loosely. “We’ve got this.”

She frowned. “Got what?”

“Go sit on the couch, relax, and we’ll clean up,” I said.

Daria didn’t move, and her disbelief was both tangible and cute.

I didn’t suspect she was used to help without having to bribe someone. “I promise you, Tanner knows how to load a dishwasher and I’m perfectly capable of putting leftovers in the fridge. If we weren’t capable of taking care of ourselves, our apartment would be a wreck.”

She pushed back from the table with an exaggerated sigh. “All right. I will stow my skepticism in favor of your generous offer. Be careful though.”

“With...?” I expected her to come back with some quirk about putting things away.

She finally smiled. “A woman could get used to this kind of treatment.”

I wished I could promise her that was an option. “Go.”

Tanner and I set to work with after-dinner clean-up. Each time one of us brushed past the other in the kitchen, a jolt raced through me. We had far less space at home, and even nursing a crush, this had never been a problem for me before. We were constantly sliding past each other, bumping gently against each other, and placing a casual hand here or there to keep from running into each other.

None of it had ever registered for me the way it did now, when I was trying so hard to ignore any connection we had.

“Are you all right?” Tanner asked quietly. “You seem a little, I don’t know, off?”

“I’m fine.” My assurance came quickly, and I heard the lie in my tone as much as I tasted it.

Tanner’s frown said he didn’t buy it any more than I did, but he didn’t push the issue.

We finished up, and headed toward the living room, Tanner grabbing the small box with fortune cookies as we walked.

“Heads-up,” he said, and tossed a pre-packaged cookie in Daria’s direction.

She snagged it out of the air without pause, from her spot on the corner of the sectional. Tanner tossed her a second one, and she caught it easily as well.

He settled in the middle of the couch, and I took a seat at the other end, as far from him as was possible without sitting

on the floor. He gave me a questioning look, then tossed me two cookies.

“Ooh, are we playing *in bed*?” Daria asked.

Tanner worked his jaw.

I had no idea how to answer the seemingly nonsensical question. “We’re sitting on the couch. Playing what?”

Daria rolled her eyes, the corners of her mouth quirking up. “Where you read the fortune, and add *in bed* to the end.”

I didn’t get it. I exchanged looks with Tanner, and he shrugged.

“You’ve never done that.” Disbelief filled Daria’s question.

I shook my head.

“Time to expand your horizons.” Daria cracked her cookie in the package, opened the plastic, and pulled out the slip of paper. “Your road to glory will be rocky, but fulfilling. In bed.” She looked up at us, expectation written on her face.

I chuckled. “Okay. I can see the fun in this.” I cracked a cookie open and grabbed the fortune. “Courage is not the absence of fear; it is the conquest of it. In bed.”

“Yeah, all right, I like this.” Tanner laughed. “All things are difficult before they are easy. In bed.”

Daria grinned. “That’s the truth.” She held up her second cookie. “I assume we do two rounds of this?”

“I mean, they gave us six cookies,” Tanner said. “It’s bad luck not to read the fortunes and read the cookies on the day you get them.”

It was a silly superstition, but I'd always found it endearing.

Daria cracked her second cookie open in response, and read aloud. "If you want the rainbow, you have to tolerate the rain. In bed." She wrinkled her nose, but her amusement didn't vanish. "Not sure I'm into that."

"You're not sure?" Tanner asked.

She twisted her mouth and stared at him. "Correction. I'm definitely not into that. Unless we're talking real rain, but not in bed. More like kisses in the rain..." She cleared her throat. "Anyway, Colin's up."

She looked so adorable—flushed and having fun. No wonder Tanner was spending so much time watching her tonight.

I retrieved my fortune. "The best way to get rid of an enemy is to make a friend. In bed. If orgasms are involved, I could totally see that."

"The right orgasm would make an eternal friend out of me," Daria said. "But it would have to be one hell of an orgasm."

"I'll keep that in mind." Did Tanner's voice just drop an octave?

My jealousy surged, and I swallowed it. "Your turn."

Tanner cracked open the last cookie. "Be passionate and totally worth the chaos. In bed. Truer words were never spoken."

"And I assume few things are more chaotic in bed than adding extra people." Why the fuck did I say that?

Tanner nodded. "True. True."

Daria pursed her lips and raised her brows. “Done that a lot, have you? Added extra people *in bed*?”

“A few times.” Tanner was unfazed.

I’d heard these stories and wasn’t in the mood to listen again, but I brought up the topic and Daria looked curious. “As long as there’s no inappropriate touching, am I right?” I was just setting myself up for a hard fall.

Daria leaned in, elbows on her knees, pressing her breasts together and giving me a view I definitely shouldn’t be staring at and absolutely couldn’t pull my gaze from. “Beyond consent, where do you draw an *appropriate* line in an orgy?” she asked.

“I didn’t participate in the orgies, and when we’re talking threesomes, if there’s another guy there it’s because she wanted it, and that’s fine. I’m there for her.” Of course he was. Good old Tanner, the ladies’ man.

“In other words, *inappropriate* means no making out with the other guy.” I tried so hard to keep the bitterness from my voice.

Daria’s wince told me I hadn’t succeeded. “Wait,” she said. “You’re telling me all that fucking, and it was one-hundred percent straight affair for you. You’ve never even kissed another man.”

I didn’t want to hear his answer, because as much as I wanted to pretend I didn’t care, it would hurt more to know he’d experimented with another guy than believing he’d never considered it.

Tanner shook his head. “Balls touch in a threesome”—he said it as casually as *do you need milk from the store*—“but no, never with another guy. Not even kissing.”

Thank God.

Daria clucked. “I just... Okay, I guess.”

“Why do you seem so surprised?” Tanner asked.

She shrugged. “I figure that’s your chance to taste it all, why would you pass it up?”

“Would *you* take the chance for a taste of everything?” I was curious.

Daria nodded. “Yes.”

“Men. Women?” Now Tanner was the one who sounded skeptical.

“Yes,” Daria repeated.

Tanner’s eyes grew wide. “You’re bi?”

She laughed lightly. “Feeling a bit like a broken record—that’s a large vinyl plate with grooves in it, by the way—and yes.”

“We know what a record is.” And now I liked her even more.

“No way to tell who knows what these days. *Really*, Tanner?” She leaned into the question. “Never even tempted once? All that hot, sexy meat, and no guy even turned your head.”

I swore Tanner glanced at me.

“Not a single man in the Olympic village made me want to kiss him,” Tanner said.

“I’m just saying you should try it at least once.” Daria wasn’t leaving this alone. What was her deal?

I didn't want to be doing this; it was time to end the conversation.

Tanner stared at her, brow furrowed. "I should just walk up to some random guy and say "Hey, kiss me so I can see what it's like."

"You'd do it with a woman. Maybe with a line like *you look delicious enough to have for lunch.*"

Tanner coughed. "Not again."

"Besides," Daria said. "You don't have to do it with a random stranger. You know a guy who'd help you out so you could say you've done it. Come on. Make tonight a night of firsts."

Lord kill me now. Why couldn't I find my voice to stop this ridiculous conversation?

"Oh my God. Are you trying to get us to kiss?" Tanner sounded scandalized, but not as bothered as I feared. Not really bothered at all.

"What?" Daria held Tanner's gaze. "I practically heard you get an erection when I said I'd been with other women."

I was terrified by every next sentence in this conversation, but now I was fascinated as well. And more hopeful than I wanted to be. I was supposed to be getting over Tanner. "This all seems like a bad idea. We're roommates. Business partners. Best friends."

"True." Daria chewed her bottom lip as she turned her attention to me. "I'd never want to see your friendship damaged. The two of you really are great together."

As friends. Yes. I got it.

Tanner had gone strangely quiet.

Fuck it. I was getting this out of the way so I could move on—so we all could. I stood, tugged Tanner to his feet, and did something I'd wanted to do for more than a decade: I crushed my mouth to his.

Tanner froze, his lips firm and unyielding against mine.

My gut twisted in on itself. What was I doing?

And then Tanner moved his hand to the back of my neck, gripped hard, and leaned into the kiss. He took control, nipping my lip, twisting my heart, tangling his tongue with mine. His body pressed closer, and his erection dug into my pelvis. He tasted like fortune cookies and broken hearts.

I couldn't catch my breath. This was... I'd died and gone to heaven.

When he broke away, his breath came in jagged gasps and his gaze was frozen on mine.

What was I supposed to do now?

I couldn't take it. He wasn't going to reject me. Not after that. "There you go. Now you can say you've done it."

"Yeah. Now I can." Tanner's voice was gravel.

And I needed to keep myself from plummeting into fantasy. "I want to know more about these balls touching threesomes. I mean... three-person sex... Does it really work?"

Tanner shook his head hard enough to rattle something loose. "Depends on the group." He still sounded husky. "There are times a person gets left out, but if everyone is into it..."

I assumed it worked sometimes. Alana talked about how her uncle Dustin had both a boyfriend and a girlfriend, but the last thing I was doing was bringing up students or kids or

brothers. I was rock hard from that kiss, and my imagination was running rampant with fantasies of what came next.

Except, Tanner wasn't the only other person naked and kissing me in my imagination. The way Daria watched us now, face flushed, dark bra peeking through pale cotton, and top unbuttoned enough to hint at round, firm breasts, had her joining us in my imagination.

“Is there any way to know if everyone's into it before you start?” I asked.

Daria's smile was both shy and seductive. “It does seem to be a night of experimentation. I'd be into it.”

Wait. I'd gone from being surprised and relieved that Tanner had never been with another man, to kissing, to talking about all three of us...

Seriously?

Whatever kind of weird, amazing alternate dimension I'd stepped into, I wanted to stay here as long as possible.

10

daria

WATCHING Colin and Tanner kiss may have been the single hottest thing I'd ever witnessed. They had fireworks on the Fourth of July levels of sparks, and if Colin was into this idea of all three of us, I didn't want to come up with any excuses to turn them both down.

"How does this work?" I asked.

"How does any sex work? Very first it helps if you're close enough to each other to touch." Tanner grasped my fingers, tugged me to my feet, and pulled me closer to him and Colin. "From there, it's also nice to have a space big enough for three people, and then we see where the night takes us."

Sounded simple enough. Once we got to figuring out where limbs went and which pegs went in which holes, I assumed things would get more complicated, but I could start with simple. "So... my room?"

The heat and anticipation pulsing through me made it easy to ignore how very unsexy the train of all three of us traipsing up the stairs was.

We stepped into my room, and a strange shiver passed through me. I didn't bring one-night stands home, and I hadn't seen anyone more significant since the divorce.

“You all right?” Colin asked.

This definitely fell into the *one-night stand* category, but it wasn't as though we were going to accidentally run into the girls. I pushed the thought aside and smiled. “Now we see where the night takes us, huh?”

“That's what I hear.” Colin cupped my face between his palms and kissed so very gently. His hesitation made my heart skip, and when he pressed in harder with a groan, I gasped. Heat and desire spilled inside as we devoured each other in a hungry kiss. I gripped his shirt in my fists, needing something—anything—to keep me grounded.

This wasn't confident, *I do this all the time*, this was the desperation mixed with uncertainty and stolen kisses that needed to be all consuming before they came to an end at curfew. I hadn't been kissed like this since college. A whimper rose in my throat and I swallowed the sound.

Tanner brushed his lips along my neck. “There's no one here but us,” he murmured. “You don't have to be quiet.”

I hadn't even considered that. Silence and orgasms went hand in hand at home.

Tanner tugged my hair hard enough to draw a surprised groan from me as he pulled me away from Colin. Tanner yanked my head back and hovered his mouth over mine. “Good girl.”

The angle was odd, but the praise was delicious and his kiss was intoxication made more intense by the fact that I was pressed between two hard bodies.

God, this felt amazing, and we'd only rounded first base.

Colin trailed his fingers down the center of my chest, undoing the buttons on my shirt along the way, and letting the

fabric hang loose when he reached the bottom. When he pressed back in, his shirt, his jeans, and his erection pressed into my bare stomach, tempting me with the contrast in textures and topography. He glided his palms up my sides with a feather-light touch, adding to the simmer, and drew my chin back for another kiss.

Tanner unhooked my bra with a flick of efficiency, and the tension vanished around my chest. He lifted the lace out of the way.

The cool air against my breasts vanished in a blanket of warmth when his hands moved in, to knead gently. How was this happening? If one of them pinched me, would I wake up? I wasn't willing to risk it.

Tanner pressed his lips to the hollow behind my ear. "I loved that groan," he murmured. "What will it take to get more from you?"

I could be coy, say something like *I'm sure you'll figure it out*, but asking for what I wanted tended to yield the best success. "Suck on my nipples."

"Fuck, I like the way you say that." Tanner honed in his focus, rolling one hard nub between his fingers, as Colin dropped his head and wrapped his lips around the other.

At the shock of wet heat and suction, I gasped and pressed into Colin's mouth. I made sure to let out every whimper and sigh as Colin devoured and Tanner caressed.

Need pulsed between my thighs and I squeezed my legs together. It didn't help to either diminish or feed the desire. I'd heard some women could get off this way, just by having their breasts played with. I wasn't one of them, but it was tempting to let the men try a little longer.

I covered Tanner's hand, and guided it away from my breast and down my stomach, to press into my mound. His *mmm* rumbled through my back as he undid my jeans and slid his hand under my panties.

"So wet." He slipped his fingers along my skin. "Fucking incredible." He dipped between my folds.

The delicious shock of his touch penetrated a layer of anticipation. I grunted and my hips bucked to get closer. I needed something to hold onto. Some way to reciprocate, but I couldn't reach Tanner. I cupped Colin's cock through his jeans.

He jerked into me with a laugh that ended in a groan. I stroked him while Tanner did the same to me.

"I want to hear you come. Again and again." Tanner dipped toward my opening then back up to my clit. "Show me what you like."

I covered his hand again, pressing my fingers over his and into my aching need. He let me set the rhythm and pressure, and I liked this too much to try to hold back. I didn't know where to focus, pinned between them like this. Every touch was simple on its own, but incredible when put together.

As I lost myself in mounting pleasure, my touch fell away from Colin. He pressed closer, grinding against my exposed hip, his erection and zipper digging into my skin with a delicious burn.

My breath came in short gasps. Colin crushed his mouth to mine, swallowing my cries as I came hard, using Tanner's hand to stroke until the touch was too much and I had to force him away.

“Holy fuck, that was way better than doing that myself.”
Did I say that out loud?

Colin’s short laugh confirmed I had. “I’d hope so.” His grin was sheepish and smug at the same time. Irresistibly-sexy-meets-boy-next-door.

Tanner pulled his hand away gently, and I couldn’t help but follow as he raised his fingers to his mouth and sucked one clean. “Your pussy tastes so good.” The guttural words yanked me back into the moment.

Colin stepped past me to glide his tongue up Tanner’s fingers, then press his lips in for a kiss. Seeing their kiss was as scorching as watching them share my taste, especially when Tanner gripped the back of Colin’s neck and held him tight. Their groans lit my body on fire.

I’d almost be content to sit back and watch the two of them consume each other, but I’d been promised a threesome, and I wanted to see what came next.

When Tanner and Colin broke apart, I swore the air between them was going to combust. Colin turned away first, like he had downstairs, and Tanner shifted his attention to me. There was no stretching or craning my neck to make this kiss work. Tanner dove in with concentrated intensity as he shoved my top to the floor then stripped off his own shirt.

His skin was hot against mine, his kisses demanding and desperate. With his hands on my hips, he moved backwards toward the bed, until he was sitting on the mattress. He drew me into his lap.

I straddled his legs and draped my arms around his neck. “All these layers of clothing between us will lead to a lot of

dry humping.” I had to tease him or I’d lose myself in his ferocity.

“It’ll also keep me from coming too fast.” His voice was an octave lower than normal.

I was tempted to push him back and grind against him, see if I could make the coming happen regardless. I was also intently aware Colin was still here and I wanted them both. Besides, Colin had to be a safer option for keeping my wits. “I have an easier solution.”

“Oh?” Tanner cocked an eyebrow.

When I stood, his grunt of disappointment was tangible. I turned to Colin and brushed my lips over his. He knotted his fingers in my hair and crushed our mouths together.

I was so wrong—this wasn’t safety, it was purity combined with intoxication.

In a frantic tumble of limbs and attempting to feel everything about each other, we managed to get each other’s clothes off. His cock sprang up the instant it was released—no wonder he didn’t need a fancy car. No need to compensate here.

I wrapped my fingers around the shaft, stroking slowly as Colin pulled me in for more kisses. “You have condoms?” I didn’t know who I was asking. I had some in my purse, and would go get them if I had to, but I’d rather not take a break from this incredible moment.

Colin nodded.

Tanner kissed along my bare shoulder. The way his dick left an impression on my ass, he’d lost the rest of his clothes, too. “I want to watch you ride him,” he said.

Colin chuckled. “I thought you were the one who liked being the main event.”

“The two of you are the exception.” Tanner’s words caressed my soul. “Alone. Together. Whatever.” He slid a condom between us.

I grabbed the foil package, and used my full body to nudge Colin toward the bed. Flavored condom? Had to be Tanner’s, but I had no complaints. As Colin laid down I tore the rubber free. He was too thick to do my favorite trick well, but I could improvise. I rolled the condom down a few inches with my mouth, finishing the job with my fingers.

The twin groans of appreciation that I received for the brief show were fuel on the fire raging inside me. I kept my lips wrapped around Colin, my hand at the base of his shaft, and sucked hungrily on his cock.

“So good.” He grabbed my arms and I lifted my head. “But you’re gonna make me come, and I’m not ready for that yet.”

Two guys, at once, who both cared about lasting long enough to draw out the fun. Could I ever go back to normal sex again?

I slid up Colin’s body, intently aware of Tanner’s scorching gaze on us. I brushed my breasts over Colin’s cock, then my stomach, finally straddling his legs and hovering over his erection.

He grabbed his shaft, slid to nudge my opening, and thrust his hips up. The way he stretched me out put my favorite dildo to shame. And then he was gripping my hips hard. Hammering inside me. Pressing his thumb to my clit, which was both too sensitive and not enough so, and my body didn’t know how to react.

Tanner pressed into me from behind, bringing the frantic fucking to a pause. He kissed along my shoulder and nipped at my earlobe. “Do you think you can take us both at once?” He glided a lubed-up finger to nudge tease my rear entrance.

“God, I want to try.” I didn’t mean to say that aloud, but I was glad I had.

Tanner urged me to lean forward until my chest was pressed to Colin’s. He reached behind me to spread my ass cheeks, and Tanner slipped the head of his dick along the same path his finger had traveled a moment ago.

I’d had anal sex before—with other men, with my toys... I had to be incredibly turned on and in a mood to want it, and right now I was both. I relaxed as Tanner pushed in, and was grateful he knew better than to rush.

His slow penetration gave me time to appreciate how different this new sensation was. Both of them in me, the wall between their cocks thin, and the friction high. *Wow*.

They started rocking again, a slow build to a steady speed. Colin pushed me up and lowered his head enough to draw one of my nipples into his mouth, while Tanner reached between us and settled his finger on my clit. There was so much stimulation that it flew past uncomfortable and toward incredible.

“I want to hear what you sound like when you scream with pleasure.” Tanner drew his fingers over my swollen bud the same way I’d done with him earlier. “I need to hear that gorgeous voice. Come for me again?”

I swore his permission was all I needed. Orgasm washed over me, stealing my breath and thoughts and forcing a scream of pleasure from my lungs. As the feeling ebbed, another

crashed around me. I lost myself in bliss, and rode the high, only vaguely aware that the guys' hands had fallen away.

Tanner's grunts grew louder and more punctuated until they drew into a long groan, and slowed to a stop. He kept rocking with us, though he wasn't sliding in and out of me anymore.

Colin's face screwed up, like a stunning, orgasmic angel, a shudder rocked through his body, and he came as well.

I fell onto his chest, and Tanner rested his weight against my back, as we all struggled to catch our breath. I may never get the chance to do this again, and I was burning this amazing moment into my mind forever.

THE SUN WAS UP, streaming through my blinds, and I was still in bed. Sure, it was barely seven, but I couldn't remember the last time I slept this late and wasn't filled with panic at the realization. I didn't have work today. Or kids. Or... anything but two gorgeous younger men pressing against me as we floated toward consciousness.

Colin's groan amplified my reluctance to move. "I need to get ready. I don't want to move, though."

"Me neither." I liked waking up to this view. His bright eyes watching me through dark lashes, and a tiny smile on his face.

"Five more minutes?" Tanner pressed into my back, his skin hot and tempting against mine.

I'd stay here all day if I thought it was an option.

Colin pushed into a sitting position, cracking the serene bubble around us. He scrubbed his face. “So how does this work now?”

How accustomed was he to one-night stands?

“We go back to life.” Tanner’s reply didn’t carry his typical confidence.

The situation was what it was. “There’s no commitment here. I won’t say last night was *just* sex—it was incredible sex”—so incredible—“but this isn’t a matter of *we did it and now we have to get married.*”

One corner of Colin’s mouth tugged up. “But it’s okay that I liked it.”

“It’d be way less okay if you didn’t,” Tanner said.

“But it shouldn’t happen again?” Colin was definitely giving off a *this is all new to me* vibe.

And I was okay with the questions. Each one made sense and made me wish I’d had a chance to ask the same thing the first time I went home with a random guy. I’d made so many assumptions since then, and Colin was letting me admit to myself this wasn’t something people just knew how to do.

“I wouldn’t put pressure on future hookups, one way or another,” I said. In my head, that wasn’t the answer most guys wanted to hear, but I would’ve liked to, and I suspected Colin would too. Besides, I wanted the two of them to have another chance or two together... and I was having a hard time accepting I might not be involved.

“So, really, no pressure from either direction,” Colin said.

“Never.”

I was surprised with how quickly Tanner’s reply came.

Colin's expression was hard to read. "I should get to work. Thank you for last night. For all of it."

As he climbed out of bed, I couldn't take my gaze off his bare ass. When he pulled up his boxers, I forced myself to look away. A glance at Tanner showed a similar reaction. Was he staring too or did I just want him to be? For Colin's sake.

Colin gave one more tiny wave, and then I heard his footsteps fading as he walked down the stairs.

"In answer to your question." Tanner's statement caught me off-guard.

I turned to him. "Which one?" Had I asked a question?

"Yesterday evening, you asked why I was hitting on you."

Not quite my words, but I supposed my meaning. "Right." It seemed like so long ago.

"When I say this, it's not a line. Do you believe me?"

"Hard to know without hearing what you have to say." This was a bit surreal, sitting naked in bed with this gorgeous, cocky man, and having what felt like an adult conversation.

Tanner sighed. "That's fair. Instead then, will you trust me when I tell you that I mean it?"

He was building this up a bit, whatever it was, and I had a hard time with certain kinds of trust. My agreement sounded important to him, though, and I believed the things Tanner said, even when I thought they were arrogant, over the top, or cheesy. "I trust you."

"You're attractive, you're fun to be around, and I enjoy your company. Last night seemed like a good opportunity to explore desire further. But then you..." He raked his fingers through his hair.

“Not used to hearing *no*?”

He winced. “I’m not used to a woman—any person—who knows what they want out of life the way you do.”

The unexpected compliment warmed me and made me laugh at the same time. “I’m not that put together, I just put on a good show.”

“An amazing one.” He leaned in and pressed his lips to my cheek. “It’s super hot. I’m going to the pool to do laps. Thank you for last night.”

And then Tanner was gone too.

I had no idea what to do with myself, especially with so many thoughts bouncing in my head about last night and this morning.

11

daria

MY BED WAS empty except for me. Not unusual, but it left me feeling more alone than normal. As I rolled my head to the side, a bottle of lube—the tiny one I usually kept in the bathroom cabinet—made me smile at the memories of last night. Now I knew where Tanner got that. I was a bit relieved he hadn't had KY in his pocket.

My schedule was as empty as my bed. Very unusual. I had a text from Kandace telling me she'd better not catch any hint I was working today. What was I supposed to do?

Alana loved to tell me about all the things she was going to do when she was an adult that were things I didn't allow. She'd be pretty bummed to know one thing I couldn't do was call my friends in the middle of the day and say *let's hang out*. Carly was in Italy. Actually, she was probably somewhere over the Midwest right about now, since her plane got in this afternoon.

That meant she'd be taking the rest of the week off. I could snag some of her time tomorrow, but when she landed today she'd want to sleep off the jet lag and time zone change. I'd known Carly forever, and she worked for the same angel investment firm I did. No one was better at appraising a property being considered as part of an investment. She could

find the flaws a buyer didn't want someone to see, or uncover things that weren't nearly as bad as the lending bank tried to claim, and our firm flew her all over the world to make sure their money was going into the right properties.

I sent her a quick text telling her we should have coffee tomorrow, then called Dustin. I'd passed that point in my life where it was embarrassing to say my brother was one of my best friends, and I liked his partners, too.

"Yellow," Dustin answered cheerfully.

I could make small talk, but that wasn't us. "Where are you going for lunch?"

"Are you looking for suggestions? When you're in Hawaii you don't have McDonalds. Go find some local hole in the wall."

I snorted a laugh. "Like you *ever* eat at McDonalds. And I'm not in Hawaii." The second bit of my reply came out softly.

"What happened?"

"Work. And since the Disneyland thing with Joe... But now work is done."

"I get it."

I knew he would. A decade ago, Dustin would've given me grief over sacrificing a vacation because work asked, but my circumstances were extreme and his work habits were a lot less healthy than mine now.

"Speaking of..." He trailed off.

"You're on a tight deadline and working through lunch?" And probably dinner.

“Bingo.”

I smiled at the empty room. “I get it.”

Dustin laughed. “Go take a drive. Head into the canyons and have lunch. Something. Enjoy the time to yourself.”

“Maybe.” The idea sounded fun, but I felt so strange not doing... anything. Come to think of it, I may have struggled to unwind going on vacation by myself anyway. I’d ask Dustin if he wanted to have dinner at any point this week, but he wouldn’t be free and neither would his partners, since they all worked together. “Tell Adrienne and Phillip I said *hi*.”

“I will. Don’t work.”

I rolled my eyes. “Byeee.”

I flopped back on my bed. Now what?

Fuck it. I needed to be busy and now seemed like the perfect time to do those little things around the house that were always waiting until I had more time. I made three lists on my phone, one for today, tomorrow, and Friday. I’d start small with replacing the interior doorknobs on the main floor to match the rest of the house, and deodorizing the carpet to get rid of the lingering cheese puff dust I was pretty sure was causing a faint funky smell.

When I stepped into the shower, a large dildo suction cupped to the seat winked back at me. Did Tanner see that? He’d have to be blind not to. At least it didn’t seem to change his impression of me, or maybe it had a little to do with why he came on so strong last night.

I wanted to be mortified, but I’d had his cock inside me, so we were probably past the point of this being TMI. And speaking of... Memories of last night would make any

morning masturbation routine pale in comparison, so the dildo was going back in its drawer.

Shower done, hair pulled back, and toy stashed, I was on my way to the hardware store. I never knew where to find the little things here—the way this place was organized didn't make sense to me. But an hour later, I had what I needed and I was home again.

I finished the doorknob on the half-bath off the kitchen, and was working on the one for the room Colin was staying in when I had the weirdest sensation I was being watched. I looked up and found Colin standing next to me, and my heart tried to leap from my chest. “Holy shit, you scared me.”

“Sorry.” He chuckled. “You didn't hear me come in.”

“I didn't expect anyone home for a while.”

He shrugged. “Deacon—the guy whose place I'm doing the painting in—had to close early for a family emergency. Are you evicting us and changing the locks already?” His teasing was undercut with the faintest hint of concern.

“I mean, once you give a guy a key to your place, he thinks he lives there or something,” I teased.

Colin's smile was the kind of sweetness and sincerity that could melt a person's insides. “The nerve of some men. Do you need any help?”

“This would be easier with a second set of hands.”

“I'll put my hands wherever you tell me to.” Colin winced. “That came out wrong, didn't it?”

So different from Tanner, and adorably sexy in his own way. “I think it sounded exactly the way you wanted it to,” I said.

“If you call me on shit like that, I’ll have to clean up my act.”

“Never change for someone else.” I paused and replayed my response in my head. “That came out way more seriously than I meant it to.”

Colin smirked. “Where do you want me boss?”

Face buried between my legs, using that skilled tongue of his.

Just because we didn’t put limits on future encounters, didn’t mean I needed to be daydreaming about jumping their bones every chance I got. “Hand me the next screw then hold this exactly where it is.” I nodded at the doorknob.

“Just assume there are going to be a lot of *screw* jokes racing through my head as we do this.” He handed me the hardware.

“Assume it’s the same for me.”

The work went a lot faster with Colin’s help, and I was double grateful he was there when it came time to push the couches to the edge of the living room.

“Explain this cheese puffs thing to me again,” Colin said. “I’m missing something. There’s not a speck of visible dirt in your house, but you’re worried about cheese in the carpet?”

Because I’d cleaned the place top to bottom before they arrived, and I had someone come in three times a week to stay on top of the mess. I tugged on my ponytail. “We bought this powder, and Harmony used way too much on the popcorn, then spilled the bowl on the floor in front of the TV. I’ve vacuumed a couple of times, but I can smell it still. That faint, decaying fake cheese scent.”

Colin wrinkled his nose. “You make it sound so appetizing.”

“It’s a gift.” I grabbed the deodorizer I’d bought at the hardware store, and sprinkled it liberally on the carpet. “The instructions say I have to wait before I vacuum it up. Wanna split that last beer with me?”

“Ms. Lane, are you trying to get me drunk to take advantage of me?” Colin’s scandalized voice rose an octave.

“Not at all. I want you completely sober when I take advantage of you.” Was that kind of joking allowed, especially with Colin? I had no idea. “But seriously, I just want to get it out of the fridge.”

Colin bowed and gestured toward the kitchen. “Sounds reasonable. After you.”

I grabbed the last beer from the fridge and turned to find Colin already waiting with the bottle opener. He popped the top. I took a short swallow and handed the drink to him.

“Tanner’s missing all the fun,” I teased.

A shadow crossed over Colin’s face, but it vanished so quickly I could have imagined it. “You can recruit him to help tomorrow,” Colin said.

Weird. “I don’t have anything nearly as interesting as installing doorknobs planned. I’m cleaning grout.”

“Maybe you could get him to put on a maid outfit and help.”

“A boy maid or a girl maid?” Because I could picture Tanner in a short black skirt that did nothing to hide those iron swimmer’s thighs. An unpleasant whiff of something reached

me and I wrinkled my nose. That wasn't me, was it? "Do you smell that?" I was almost afraid to ask.

Colin wore a similar expression. He lifted his arms and sniffed. "Pretty sure it's not me."

The smell was stronger now, and giving me flashbacks to my sorority days before I learned not to mix hard liquors. I followed my nose toward the living room, the scent growing more potent and vile with each step. Was it starting to burn my eyes?

12

tanner

I LEARNED a long time ago how to turn off my brain while I was swimming or otherwise working out, so it was an easy decision for me to head straight for the pool after I left Daria's. If I stopped to think, I'd dwell on last night. I couldn't do that.

With my camera set up in its normal place, I dove into my personal time trials. I pushed until my body ached and my muscles screamed. I was so close to hitting my mark. Less than a second away. But my body wasn't having it anymore; I needed to call it a morning.

I spent the next hour stretching, making sure I was careful with my shoulder, and doing all the exercises that became second-nature after physical therapy.

The instant I stopped, stripped, and stepped into the shower, my mind turned on again.

Last night was incredible—holy fuck, Daria blew my fantasies about her out of the water. She was an amazing combination of reserved and bold that made me want to unwrap her and explore her for hours. Again and again. Her body. Her mind.

I expected I'd discover something new every time.

I was glad no one else was in the locker room, to see my dick standing at attention in agreement. I dried off and dressed, clinging desperately to thoughts of Daria.

As I headed out to the parking lot, I lost my grip on the images of her, and Colin slammed in to take her place. I swore I could still feel his lips crushed to mine. The scruff of stubble burning my skin. The hunger in that connection. Enough that I'd been tempted to ask him for more than a kiss.

As I was walking out, John was coming in.

“Hold up.” I stopped him. “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure.”

“The building, are you selling it because of maintenance problems?” I wasn't in the mood for subtext. Might as well ask him outright.

He stared back, shock on his face. “It does need work, yes. The other half hasn't been open in a while and smells like chlorine. The HVAC over there needs work. But there's nothing structurally wrong with it. No cracks in the foundation or anything like that.”

He sounded sincere, and usually I could read those things. Though, if I'd misread my feelings for Colin all these years—

Whoa, where did that come from?

“Cool. The bank was asking me some questions, so I'll pass that along. Catch you around.” Either John was full of shit or Davenport had heard wrong. The second option seemed more likely, but John wasn't going to tell me *yeah, the place is falling apart* if he wanted to sell.

I didn't know what to think. About anything.

The library beckoned—a quiet place with no reminders or chances of running into my distractions.

Colin came out as bisexual when as we started high school. I hadn't seen it coming; sometimes the obvious escaped me. I spent a lot of time wondering if maybe I was the same, bisexual or gay, and hadn't realized that either. The pondering involved trying to imagine myself kissing other men. Kissing Colin. Asking Colin to help me experiment and figure it out.

One thing hadn't escaped me though—Colin put up with a lot of teasing when he came out. I'd done everything I could to shut it down, and I never wanted him to think I was adding to it by saying *hey, make out with me to see if I like it*.

Beyond that, I couldn't picture myself with another guy, and I *really* liked girls.

The easy answer was that I must be straight.

When I got settled into an isolated room in the library, I expected to lose myself in work, the way I had in my workout. I was looking up bankers and other contacts for loans, emailing, and hustling like crazy.

Sure I noticed when a man was attractive, but I couldn't imagine myself *with* them. Going back to Daria's questions last night, even when I was fucking around, hooking up with the male athletes didn't appeal to me.

It had a little bit to do with the fact that homosexuality wasn't only barely becoming acceptable in athletic forums. An athlete never knew who might out them. But I hadn't missed the experience, or been disappointed that I couldn't have it.

But after last night...

Was the experience stuck in my head because it was new and amazing, or because I wanted more? From Colin? From

someone else?

I tried for a few hours to get through my work. This would be so much easier if I knew anyone who worked with this kind of loan. True, contacts weren't always necessary, but we were looking for a significant amount of money, and being able to drop a name or two would make a difference.

With a dozen emails sent off, and thoughts of last night still racing through my mind, I packed up my stuff to head back to the pool for another practice run.

There were two texts from Colin as I left the library.

Where are you?

When you get to Daria's, we're upstairs. I'll explain then.

Jealousy surged inside, so intense I felt it in my neck. Who did I envy more—Colin or Daria? This kind of reaction didn't belong in one-night stands, but telling myself that didn't push the feeling aside.

Thoughts of the pool were gone, I needed to be at Daria's instead, whether or not it was a rational decision. When I stepped inside her place, the smell hit me hard. It was vomit carried on heavy, warm air. The back doors and windows were open, and two box fans sat near the patio door, blowing out.

Was someone sick? Concern filtered through me.

I headed upstairs. Daria's door was closed, and her laughter mingled with Colin's and flitted into the hallway. Worry plus envy meant I was the one who was going to be ill. I knocked.

"S'open," Daria called.

I pushed into the room.

“But close it fast,” she added quickly. She was sitting on her bed in a lightweight tank top and thin shorts, and it was obvious she wasn’t wearing a bra. The distinct topography of her chest—aka her rock-hard nipples—also accentuated the fact that it was about ten degrees cooler in here than in the rest of the house.

Colin sat next to her, not wearing much more, and they were both flushed and smiling.

I wasn’t used to being at a loss for words. “What happened?” It wasn’t a complicated question, but it covered a lot of territory.

Daria laughed and ducked her head. “Impromptu chemistry lesson.”

The kind that showed what kind of sparks I swore were flying between the two of them? I had no right, but that didn’t stop me from stewing in jealousy.

13

colin

“WHAT KIND OF CHEMISTRY?” Tanner asked. There was no way he was watching us with jealousy. I’d been trying to get him to notice me for how long, and he was hooked on Daria in a night? After all that bullshit about casual hookups?

I wasn’t quite being fair, since we’d known Daria for longer than a day or two, and I could absolutely see myself spending more time with her. Not just because of last night, but after today, too.

And wow I was bad at getting over Tanner. I wanted them both again. And again. “We learned if you mix the wrong kind of carpet powder with powdered cheese”—I wrinkled my nose—“*whew* it’s bad. You smelled it when you got here, but it was *way* worse a few hours ago.”

“Air’s off to keep the smell from circulating, the windows are open downstairs to get rid of the stench, and someone is coming tomorrow to fix my mistake,” Daria said. “Until then, we’re self-quarantined in our own little biome for the night.”

Tanner’s entire posture changed as he relaxed.

Daria patted the mattress. “Kick off your shoes and join us. Tell us about your day.”

He didn't hesitate, and I was surprised he sat next to me rather than diving between Daria and me. There was enough distance between us that I couldn't feel him, but he was still close enough to reach out and grab my neck and pull me in for a kiss. A long, heavy, hungry—

“Well?” I asked partly to keep my mind from wandering and at least a little because Tanner was quiet.

“Well what?”

This was odd for him, not launching into conversation any chance he got. “How was your day?” I poked his arm. “Are you sure you're Tanner?” He felt like Tanner. *Fuck*, I could dig my fingers into those biceps and just hold on for dear life.

Any resolve I had from yesterday was already shot. One taste, and I wanted him more than ever. The way I'd been sitting up here with Daria laughing over the simplest things, like the most ridiculous versus the best swimsuit episodes in anime, made me want her more too. Knowing both desires were doomed didn't dampen either one.

“It was a fantastic day.” Tanner's trademark grin was back, brighter than I expected.

Too bright? Nah. “Just like that? No details?”

“I'm milliseconds from making my qualifying time,” Tanner said.

“That is fantastic. Way to go.” I offered him a high five. One more chance at the Olympics meant more to him than anything, and I wanted him to have that.

Daria gave him a quick hug. “That's awesome, seriously.”

Why couldn't I be that casual? Because we were guys and I'd take my own gestures wrong. *Sigh*.

“But it wasn’t all good.” I couldn’t ignore that something was off.

Tanner shrugged. “It’s harder than I thought finding people at banks to talk to me, and I’m getting conflicting information about the condition of the building.” He looked at me. “I need your time and talent, to make this proposal shine.”

“You’ve got it. I’ll be done with the mural in a few days, and you can have me any other time we’re not in lessons.” I winced mentally at my own phrasing. “Daria knows people, and she’s offered to help us...”

“And I mean it. In fact, Carly will take a look at the building for you and tell you exactly what’s up,” Daria said. “I’ll ask her tomorrow. And I’m happy to give your proposal a look and give you some lender names. I’d hook you up at work, but you don’t want investors. Not until you decide to franchise. You want a loan that you pay off and you’re done.”

“What’s a Carly?” I asked.

“My best friend, my sanity, and the best fucking commercial appraiser in the world.”

Tanner wrinkled his nose. “We can’t.”

“Can’t what? Why not?” I’d missed something.

“We can’t ask Daria for help. This is her job.”

Daria raised her brows. “You teach my girls to swim.”

“You pay us for it,” Tanner said.

Daria sighed. “We’re friends. Aren’t we? Friends help friends, and I know what I’m offering.”

The more time I spent with her, the more I found about her to adore. Was I doomed to crush on everyone who was nice to

me? I wasn't having these hang-ups with Deacon. Was it because I knew he'd reciprocate? "We'd love your help."

Tanner glared at me.

"If it makes you feel better, we'll give Alana six months of lessons free," I added.

Daria pursed her lips. "It doesn't make *me* feel better. This is important to you and I can help. You'll hurt my feelings if you tell me *no*."

Tanner's smile wasn't as potent this time, but it looked more genuine. "All right. Thank you."

She clapped once. "Good. Now that we have that settled, what's on the agenda for tonight?"

"Do we need an agenda?" I wasn't great with plans. I didn't mind them, and I was fine with sticking to other people's timelines and schedules, but left on my own? I did whatever struck my fancy.

Daria shrugged. "I made a to-do list earlier just to have a schedule. I'm not quite sure what to do with myself without tasks waiting." She seemed to need this.

"What would you like to put on the agenda?" My asking was much better than my assuming.

"I don't know."

"If I might make a suggestion," Tanner said.

I gestured to him. "I'll open the floor. Tanner, what should we put on the agenda?"

"Karaoke."

That was always fun. I loved karaoke.

The way Daria wrinkled her nose wasn't encouraging. "I don't know."

"If this is about you not liking your singing voice or something, I know you can carry a tune, I heard you humming earlier. And it's not like we're musical masters." Though we weren't bad. Tanner and I were my favorite road trip car duo.

"I'm not worried about that," Daria said. "I did competition choir in high school and college. I *am* worried about making the two of you look bad." She winked.

"As if." I stared back in disbelief.

Tanner laughed. "That sounds like a challenge."

"This isn't a competition," I reminded him.

"*Everything* is a competition." Tanner's voice was light, but the words left an uncomfortable pebble in my gut.

"*Besides*," Daria's voice kept my brain from running away with the thought. "You're not going to like any of my old lady music."

I snorted a laugh. "You're anything but an old lady."

"You realize there's only eight years between us," Tanner added.

Daria twisted her mouth. "There are almost eight years between Alana and Harmony, and that's a lifetime."

"Yes. In fact, it's more than Harmony's lifetime." I wasn't big on debate or arguing, but she was wrong about this. "This is different."

The way Daria looked at me, she wasn't convinced. "Eight years is almost a third of your lifetime."

“Whatever you’re trying to prove, it’s not working,” Tanner said. “Pick a song and we’ll match you word for word.”

I heard the challenge in Tanner’s voice—he really was turning this into a competition. Though if the prize was to convince Daria she wasn’t old and we weren’t kids, I was in. “*When I Grow Up* by Garbage.” I picked before she could come back with another disagreement.

“You’re going to sing that.” Daria radiated disbelief.

I nodded.

“Do you need lyrics?”

“Nope.” I extracted myself from the bed, reluctantly leaving the comfort of being between Daria and Tanner behind.

“Xerxes, play *When I Grow Up*, by Garbage,” Daria said to the home smart system. “Music only, no vocal tracks.”

Now I was feeling that spirit of competition.

Tanner whistled and clapped as the song started up.

I didn’t miss a beat, sliding into “Bah bah bah bah, bah bah bah bah,” as the first changeover happened. Years ago, I struggled with this—even singing for a single other person—but Tanner had been amazingly patient helping me get past the fear.

Now it was easy to headbang when the beat required it, and let myself move as I sang the familiar song. The frequent claps and whistles from both Tanners and Daria made it even better tonight.

When the song finished, I took a bow, to a standing applause. Ridiculous, but also fun.

“Incredible.” Daria’s skepticism seemed to have vanished.

“But that song? Quietly fucked up,” Tanner said.

I liked it regardless. “You’ve got better?”

“Xerxes, play *Simply Irresistible*.”

Daria laughed. “Xerxes, do not do that. Cancel.”

“Do you have a problem with that song?” Tanner asked.

Daria shook her head. “But it’s not the same without the women in black dresses and red lipstick.”

“Tell me you don’t own both. We’ll wait right here if you want to change.” Tanner rested his arms behind him, leaned his weight back, and stretched his legs out on the mattress.

Daria laughed harder. “I do not. Xerxes, play *Don’t You Want Me* by The Human League.”

“I don’t know that one.” Tanner pouted.

How did he manage to make that look sexy instead of childish? “I do.” I grasped Daria’s hand and tugged her to her feet.

The angsty duet kicked off, and I sang my part without missing a beat. When the first female section kicked in, Daria held my gaze while she sang in the most incredible voice. I was stunned enough I almost missed my cue when it was my turn again.

Somehow we managed to move closer with each exchange, but never actually touched each other. As the music finished, I couldn’t look away from her flushed face and the short heaves of her chest.

Tanner’s applause broke the mood. “Absolutely amazing. However, you’re both depressing, even if you hide it under a

pair of great voices, and you don't get to pick the next song. Xerxes, play *The Look*."

He moved to the other side of Daria, spun her to face him, and started singing along with the music. A tiny smile played on her face, and I had to move to get a better view.

When Tanner sang about a brown-eyed girl being blue, he tilted Daria's chin up, and her lips parted in a silent gasp. When a chorus of *na na na na nas* kicked in, the two of them went back and forth, shimmying and grinding and harmonizing. I expected a surge of jealousy, but heat flooded me instead. I *liked* watching them together.

We worked our way through several more songs, the sexual tension in the room growing with each one. It didn't matter what someone picked, there was a reason to grind against someone else.

I was riding the high of impulsiveness and fun when Tanner finished *Opportunities* by The Pet Shop Boys. I nudged Tanner and Daria to sit on the edge of the bed. "Your phone controls the music too?"

Daria lay back to grab it off her night stand, treating me to an incredible view of her stretched out, then sat up again and handed it to me. "It does. Is your next song a surprise?"

"It is." I pulled up the music, and handed the device back.

Twin expressions of surprise met me when George Michael's *Father Figure* started. My reservations were gone as I lost myself in the song, moving to kneel in front of Tanner, hold his gaze, and let the lyrics and soulful tune wrap me up in a world separate from reality.

I rose halfway, hands on Tanner's knees, never looking away from him, as I sang the final line about being the one

who would love him until the end of time.

When the music stopped, I was nose to nose with Tanner, who stared back with wide eyes. A couple of inches closer and I'd kiss him. If I did that, I wouldn't have the strength to pull away tonight, but if I initiated and *he* pulled away, I didn't know what I'd do.

tanner

IT WAS JUST A SONG.

Colin picked it because he liked it.

He focused on me because it would be weird to sing things like *love you until the end of time* to Daria. And of course we loved each other. Best friends. Bros forever.

It didn't matter that him being so close was making my pulse race. That the faint scent of paint thinner mingled with aftershave in a way that was distinctly Colin and clogging my sinuses. And it didn't matter that his deep, soulful voice, and the way he hadn't looked away when the music stopped had my dick rock hard.

It was just a song.

Fuck it.

I grabbed his face, and crushed my mouth to his. I didn't know where his groan stopped and mine started. His stubble was rough against my mouth, his fingers dug into my thighs, and fuck if I didn't want this to go on and on.

A soft gasp next to me drilled into my thoughts enough to remind me we weren't alone, but it didn't shatter the need thrumming under my skin. I broke the kiss with a grunt and forced my gaze to Daria.

Who was here because this was her bedroom and her house and how did that slip my mind for even a second?

“I can leave if you want.” Her tone was playful and she jerked a thumb toward the door.

“No.” Colin cleared his throat and stood. “Don’t be ridiculous.” His voice was still gravel.

Mine would probably be as bad. This was where I should say *it was just a kiss* or *it wasn’t a big deal*. “What’s next on the agenda?” I managed to sound normal, but I certainly didn’t feel it. What was going on with my body? My head?

“Hang on. We’re not done with the previous conversation.” Colin was back to himself as well. “I want to know, Daria, if we hadn’t stopped, what were you going to do?”

I wanted to know that too.

Pink spread across her cheeks. “Hope you didn’t mind me watching.”

And now I was even harder. How was that possible? I also refused to lose control of this situation. “You like watching, then?”

“It all depends on the who and the what. I like it best when I can tell everyone’s enjoying themselves.” She managed both demure and confident in a single response.

Colin dropped onto the mattress next to me, his thigh brushing mine and sending another wash of desire through me.

“I’m all about everyone enjoying themselves,” I said.

Daria’s playful smile threatened to undo me. “So you’ve said.”

I rested a hand on Colin's thigh, high enough to feel his heat without me making contact. I looked him in the eye. "What do you think? Interested in enjoying ourselves a bit more?"

"I don't know." The way Colin licked his lips then caught the bottom one between his teeth was as enticing as Daria's smile. "Sure."

His agreement was all I needed. I gripped the back of his neck and kissed him again, devouring his groans, biting his lips and memorizing every sound and feeling. I used my body to push him further up on the bed, straddled his legs, and pinned his arms above his head.

With my weight pressed into him, I felt every bit of his hard body, including his erection digging into my stomach. Through his thin shorts and my T-shirt, the thrust of his hips was obvious.

Fuck, I wanted more. I cupped his cock and stroked in time with his grind.

Colin gripped my wrist. "Stop."

His strained request took a heartbeat to sink in, and I paused. I raised myself on my wrists enough to look him in the eye.

"Don't do this to turn someone else on. Not even her."

"I'm not—"

Colin moved his palm to my chest and pushed me away, holding me at arm's length. "Think carefully about what you say and do next. Hard and horny is not the best time to make a decision like the one you're about to make."

“Are you telling me you don’t want to do this?” Obviously. Duh, me.

“Not tonight. Not like this.”

I forced myself to pull away completely. I raked my fingers through my hair as I sat up. Stopping physically didn’t stop the arousal, take away my hardon, or obliterate the thoughts about kisses and cocks and Daria watching us.

But the few inches of space gave me enough air to breathe and reality sank in. What had I almost done to my friendship with Colin? Please don’t let it be irreversible.

I scrubbed my face, put some more distance between all three of us, and adjusted myself as best I could. “Okay, then. Now what?”

As I glanced at Colin then Daria, neither looked back.

This was exactly what I didn’t want, but I’d caused it in my desperate need to get laid. Time to fix it. I clapped once. “Like Colin said, let’s not do things this way tonight.”

“Not what I meant,” Colin muttered.

But it wasn’t in opposition of what he meant, either. “Hands up if you regret last night,” I said.

Neither of them moved.

“So, we all have wonderful memories. We’re all cool, like we said this morning? It was mind blowing sex and none of us wants to take it back?”

Colin shrugged, but it looked like he was fighting a smile.

One corner of Daria’s mouth tugged up and she met my gaze. “Do we have to raise our hands to ask a question, too?”

“You didn’t raise your hand, so obviously not,” I teased.

Her smile grew. “I didn’t want anyone to think I had regrets.”

“We should do something not-sexy,” Colin said.

I understood his point, but I wished I didn’t. “Three people with incredible chemistry sharing a bed? It’s all sexy.”

Daria snorted. “That’s such a man thing to say.”

“You disagree?” I kept my tone light, but I didn’t try to hide the challenge in my question.

“No, but I know better than to say it out loud.”

“We could watch movies.” Colin still sounded flat. He wasn’t quite with us.

There had to be some way to help him feel more at ease again.

“What’s the least sexy movie you can think of?” Daria asked.

My balls ached and my brain was still trying to work on a less than optimal blood supply, but I was an adult and I could think through arousal without getting off. And maybe make Colin smile again. “*Fantastic Four*.”

“The ones with Chris Evans or the remake?” Colin went straight for the bait.

Daria’s mouth formed an *O*. “He’s pretty sexy.”

Colin felt the same and he never made a secret of it. “She said *least sexy* movie, not *worst* movie.” Some of the playfulness was emerging in Colin’s voice.

I scoffed. “Worst movie I can think of is *Justice League*.”

“How dare you?” Daria’s shrill disdain was exaggerated.

Colin grinned. “Aquaman gives him performance anxiety.”

I couldn’t believe he went there. I grabbed a pillow and lobbed it at him.

Daria snagged it out of the air with a smoothness that most basketball coaches wished could be taught. “Pillow fights are definitely sexy.”

“In movies. They’re not in real life,” Colin said with a kind of authority that implied he had personal experience.

Did he? Because now I was picturing Daria and Colin, in their lightweight clothing with minimal to no support, bouncing around on the bed, trying to avoid pillows. That would definitely be sexy. I knew better than to say it aloud this time. “*Game of Thrones*.”

Colin’s expression faltered. “There are tits and peens everywhere.”

“But would you call it sexy?” Apparently a lot of things turned me on, but Hodor’s dick never had.

Daria shook her head. “I would not. Let’s do it.” She grabbed a remote from the bedside table and turned on the TV over her dresser.

We settled in to watch the show, each of us picking a different spot on the bed to sit. It was disappointing but it made sense. Colin and I had seen the first few seasons multiple times, and it was clear from the way Daria bounced her commentary off ours that she had too.

About the time Ned Stark arrived in King’s Landing, Daria’s phone rang. She glanced at the screen. “My own small council beckons. Be right back.” She stepped out of the room and was closing the door before she said “Hey, Sweetie. How was your day?”

Her kids.

Silence settled between Colin and I with Daria gone. The TV provided the dialog, but the Mystery Science Theater Three Thousand commentary vanished.

I didn't want to feel uncomfortable around Colin. "Are we good?" I made sure to push the sincerity into my question.

"We're good." Colin nodded. He sounded like he meant it. "You can sit up here if you promise to keep your hands to yourself." Was he joking as he patted the spot next to him?

Thank fuck. "Cross my heart." I moved to sit with my back to the headboard, still keeping distance between us, but not nearly as much as before. This was better.

Daria came back a short while later. "Alana says *hi*" she relayed as she joined us on the bed.

The reminder of our actual relationship with Daria, and that next week we'd go back to our lives and this would become just a pleasant memory, pretty much killed the last of my sexy thoughts.

We went back to the show and our play by play, but as each new episode rolled, we said less and yawned more.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but the sun outside the window said it was morning. Daria was breathing steadily, her back to me and her ass pressed into me. And fuck if I wasn't hard again.

I should extract myself from this situation before she woke up.

She wiggled against me. "Is that your sword, Jon Snow?"

"Are you talking to me or him?" Sleep lined Colin's question.

So much for leaving. Not that I really wanted to.

“Both of you, apparently.” Daria giggled.

That was adorable. I rested a hand on her hip. I was glad Colin stopped me last night, but this wasn't me pushing for sex with another man to get someone else off.

“Are you offering to help me sheath my blade?” It was tempting to slip my fingers under the elastic of her shorts, and tease her bare skin, but I could take things a *little* slowly.

Daria glanced over her shoulder at me, a teasing smile on her face. “I'm offering to watch you do it yourself.”

“Did you just tell him to go fuck himself?” Colin asked.

Daria laughed. “No, though I can see now why you'd think that.” She extracted herself from between us and crawled away, her ass in the air and wiggling with each step. She turned and faced us. “I'm asking if I can watch.”

I did like to be part of the show. I pulled back the sheets to expose myself. I finished the job my cock had started in working itself free from my boxers, and fisted it loosely. “Like this?”

“Exactly like that.” Daria looked at Colin. “Yes or no?”

He kicked aside the bedding as well and pushed down the waistband of his shorts to expose himself. “Yes.”

Fuck yes. I focused on Daria since the show was for her. The way she watched us with her tongue caught between her teeth and her chest heaving with every breath. As I stroked slowly, she kneaded her breasts through her tank top, then worked one free.

Watching her watching us was hotter than most things my imagination could come up with, especially knowing Colin

was part of the same show.

She moved her hand lower, to press through her shorts.

That wouldn't do at all. "Take them off," I ordered. "I want to see your gorgeous pussy."

Daria's blush spread down her neck and to her exposed breast and nipple. So alluring. She pushed off her bottoms, lay back halfway with her weight on one arm to prop her up, and spread her legs. The way she danced her fingers along her slick, glistening skin made me groan.

"So fucking stunning." I stroked faster, and couldn't help watch for a moment as Colin did the same, his fist sliding up and down his thick, hard cock. I forced my attention back to Daria. "What do I have to do from here to get you off?"

She shook her head. "I'm not the show."

"Aren't you?" I tightened my grip and my body reacted, desire mounting inside.

Daria bit her bottom lip and dipped her fingers lower, sliding inside herself, before drawing her touch back up.

"Fuck, Daria." I needed to slow down or this would be over too soon. Or speed her up. "I want to see you come. See your gorgeous expression. Hear your incredible voice."

The way her gaze never left me as she circled her clit, the way she focused on my cock, as she rubbed herself faster, had me clenching to keep from finishing.

Her eyelids fluttered and her lips parted with a loud sigh. Her breath came in short pants.

Colin's grunts overlapped her gasps, and I could picture him jerking off to this same show.

Daria's cries when she came were better than the music last night. I swore I could feel her fingers on me, teasing my skin. She shuddered away and slowed to a stop, but she never pulled her eyes from me.

Colin let out a series of punctuated grunts that blended into a long groan, and I knew he had finished too.

I was done. I closed my eyes and tilted my head as I stopped trying to hold back. Orgasm spilled through me and stars danced behind my eyes. My pulse whined in my ears. I squeezed and pumped until my fist was a sticky mess and my dick ached.

I collapsed against the headboard with a strained laugh, and forced my eyes open. I looked between Colin and Daria. Each of them was flushed and stunning in their post coital bliss. "Number one best morning of my life," I said.

Colin's smile was lazy. "That's a high bar."

"I know what I said." As the words passed my lips a thought flashed in my mind. Could I go back to what life was before this?

Of course I could. That was the plan, that was the only option. It wouldn't be a problem.

daria

LAST NIGHT I was almost party to a major fuck-up. I let my desire get in the way of reason, and I wouldn't have forgiven myself if Colin and Tanner lost their friendship because of it.

Sure, they were adults and making their own decisions, but I'd pushed in a direction I shouldn't have.

But waking up between them for a second morning in a row, both of them obviously erect, was hard for me to ignore.

Things were good after, though. That was what mattered. We all showered, no one was avoiding anyone else, and they both helped me move everything out of the living room, so the carpet cleaners could come and fix my mess from last night.

Colin and Tanner headed out to do their own things, and I was left alone with my thoughts and my short to-do list. Tanner did promise he'd be back early this afternoon to help with that, but for now, what was I supposed to do?

My phone ringing was a welcome distraction. The screen said it was Carly and I had *so much* to tell her.

"Hey, girl," I answered. "Welcome back."

"Hey." Carly's voice was all sunshine and confidence. "Got your message. Wanted to say *hi*. Find out why you're not in Hawaii."

I was dying to tell her every last detail, but I had no idea where to start. “Eh, you know. Bernie. But I’m done with that, so I’m chilling. How was Italy?” I didn’t need to provide details; she knew enough to fill in the blanks.

“Same as always. Gorgeous. Envious. Calling my name.” Carly spent enough time there that she had talked several times about moving. I was both surprised and grateful she hadn’t yet. “You let that asshole talk you into missing a week on the beach?”

“I’d rather take the trip with the girls”—and what was happening here was way better than sand in my buttcrack and a mediocre hookup with a stranger—“so it’s fine.”

“Fine? This was supposed to be your vacation and it’s *fine*? Hair is fine. Ranch dressing on salad is fine. Time off should at least be *good*, or some more fabulous adjective. Wait. Sexy swim coaches are still staying at your place, yes or no?”

I laughed as heat carried on memories flooded through me. “Yes.” I had to tell her. I was dying to talk about this and hadn’t realized until she asked. “And Oh. My. God.” That summed the experience up nicely.

“Whoa. Back the fuck up,” Carly said. “Eye candy doesn’t get that kind of reaction. You were going to gloss over whatever led to a statement like that with *fine*? The fuck, Daria?”

“It’s a story best told in person.” And I needed to wrap my head around words for the last few nights that went beyond *hubba hubba*.

Carly huffed. “Fine. Mimosas at Mia’s, one hour. You bring details, I’ll bring presents. *Mwah*.” She disconnected.

I had no idea how I was going to sum this up, but I did like tripping back through the memories in order to figure it out.

I stuck around the house long enough to let the cleaners in. Steve, the guy who ran the company and who was overseeing this cleaning personally, was a long-time friend. I didn't have a problem handing him the keys to the house, telling him to lock up when he was done, and being on my way to meet Carly.

She was already waiting outside the restaurant when I got there. We asked for a table outside, placed our orders, and sent the waitress on her way.

As soon as we were alone, Carly leaned in. "Spill. Now. I go on a boring, normal trip to Milan, and you manage to live a romance novel meet cute while I'm gone, plus turn it filthy."

"It's not a romance novel and it's not cute." I was being intentionally vague, and enjoying drawing this out just a little.

"*Fine.*" Carly huffed. "A porn script then. Are they still hot when you spend more than a few hours at a time with them?"

I smiled. "They're fine."

She laughed. "You kill me, babe. Sexy swimmers. Younger men. Temporary roommates in awkward situations with implausible tangents. And dirty sex. I'll deny ever saying this, but I'm positively green right now. *Envy.*"

"I never said it was dirty." I paused. "I mean, it totally was, but you can't just assume."

"Touché," Carly said. "So it was good?"

I sipped my drink slowly, letting her question hang in the air as I pretended to consider my answer.

Carly pursed her lips and drummed perfectly manicured nails on the table. She checked her watch. She let out a sigh.

“Daria.”

I laughed. “I think my earlier statement of *oh my God* sums up the situation well. No other words. Except maybe *bow-chica-bow-wow*.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re glowing.”

“I’m having so much fun. And I know it’s only for a few days, but they’re so...” I really was having a hard time describing this without gushing like a schoolgirl. “It’s everything you’d want a setup like this to be, but wouldn’t dare hope for. They put the dishes in the dishwasher the other night, Carly. One of them helped me vacuum.”

Carly snorted. “But there’s sex too, right? I mean, if you want gorgeous hunks of man meat to do the housework, there are services for that.”

“But they did it because they *wanted* to. And yes, I already told you, there’s sex too.”

“*Boom.*” Carly leaned back in her seat with a grin. “I’m such a proud friend right now. Jealous as fuck, but good for you.”

I loved that she was for this rather than judging me. Not that judgmental had ever been an issue with Carly, but not everyone could have the best best friend in the world. “Don’t let me steal the entire morning. I want to know about this property in Italy.”

“It’s gorgeous. We literally don’t have anything like it here because it’s five hundred years old. The stonework, the stained glass, the wooden beams...” She grabbed her phone, made a few swipes, then passed it across the table.

I scrolled through a few dozen images. Carly could tell me what every bit of architecture was called, and what time

periods this was from or mimicked. To me, it was simply gorgeous. Originally it was a cathedral that had become many other things over the centuries. Kandace was mentoring a pair of men who wanted to turn it into a high-end restaurant, then spin out similar concepts from there, across Europe.

One of the reasons I loved working for The Raphael Group was they weren't just angel investors. Some of the partners mentored people who had what could be a fantastic success, but didn't necessarily have the know-how to build a proposal and pitch it to an investment group.

I handed her phone back. "You're giving it a thumbs up?"

"Absolutely. You know what you should do, since you canceled your trip—head out there with me in a few months, and check on things."

That sounded like a lot of fun. "That would mean bringing the girls." Which sounded like fun to me, but Carly was childless by choice, and not always the biggest fan of kids.

"Your kids are well-behaved, so it's all good. So much good food. The art. The buildings... Now's the time to do this."

It was a trip I'd wanted to take for a while. "We'll see."

"I just put your *yes* in my calendar." Carly grinned.

"*Oh*, speaking of buildings and sexy swimmers, I need a favor."

She stared at me, brow furrowed, then shook her head. "I want a comeback for that, but I've got nothing. What's up?"

"Tanner is looking at a building, and he's getting conflicting information about whether it's good or not. Give it a look for him? For me?"

“All right. I need a week or two, but no problem.”

We chatted a lot longer, said our goodbyes, and I headed home. As I walked inside, the heavy smell of perfumed deodorizer and wet greeted me. So much better than the toxic situation I’d left down here last night.

The note on the kitchen table from Steve said to stay off the carpet as much as possible today, and that it should be okay by tomorrow morning.

Damn. I’d probably be best off asking the guys to stay in my room again tonight... if they were okay with it. The thought pasted a goofy smile on my face and sent butterflies dancing in my tummy.

My phone rang and I grabbed it without thought. “This is Daria.”

“Why the hell aren’t you answering your emails? Why does your chat show you offline?” Bernie’s harsh questions shattered my mood.

My instinct was to shirk away from his anger, but I didn’t do that with business associates or anyone. Besides, I wasn’t in the wrong. “I spoke with Kandace, and she ordered me to take the rest of the week off once the fire was out.”

“*Kandace* didn’t secure your time for the week.” Bernie’s sneer was like nails on a chalkboard. “You’re working on my project, and I offered you an incredible bonus to do so.”

He’d offered a reasonable bonus considering the request, but I wouldn’t argue the subjective. “The work is done. I didn’t leave the task unfinished.”

“Your week was mine. That was our agreement. This is absolutely unacceptable.”

What was I supposed to say? I could offer to be available for the next day and a half, but my anger was rising at his tone and approach, and that made me want to say *fuck you* and hang up. “What do you propose?” I resisted the urge to ask the question through gritted teeth.

“I propose you wipe your machine of any and all company information, and don’t come back on Monday.”

My heart stopped. I’d heard him wrong, I must have. “Excuse me?”

“I’m terminating your employment with the company, effective immediately. Expect paperwork this afternoon. Enjoy your extended vacation, Ms. Lane.”

The line went dead.

I stared at my phone, and numbness spread through my veins. What in the... That didn’t... What?

tanner

TODAY WAS A GOOD DAY.

Who was I kidding? Today was an incredible day. From the way it started—mutual masturbation in bed was *way* better than breakfast in bed. Could I call that breakfast in bed? To the fact that I'd made my target time at the pool. Multiple times in a row. I was heading to the qualifying trials for the Olympics in a month.

I'd shouted, I'd yelled, I'd punched the air, and I'd even done a dance at the edge of the pool. I wished Colin was there to celebrate with me, but we could figure that out tonight.

He was right to stop me last night. I hadn't been thinking clearly. Now that I'd had a chance today, I was good with it. With kissing him and if it turned into more. Not that we had many more days here to play, but we might as well continue to enjoy our not-vacation.

When I stepped into Daria's house, I wasn't surprised to see portions of the living room still crammed into the dining room. It was the way the cushions from the couch were configured that made me pause. Some were stacked on their ends, and others sat on the table, pinning a blanket in place that was draped over chairs and more cushions.

Was there a blanket fort in the dining room?

I didn't hear anyone talking, and the only car outside was Daria's, so the carpet cleaners were probably gone. I approached the structure quietly. "Daria?"

"Yeah." Her voice was soft, and it definitely came from under the blankets.

"Can I come in?" Did I really just ask that? This was surreal.

"Sure."

I knelt, and crawled through what could be a doorway, where two blankets overlapped.

Daria was sitting inside, knees pulled to her chest, clutching a stuffed duck in a pink sweater.

Excitement was making me hallucinate? I kept the thought to myself—the mood in the air felt far more somber than that. "Who's your friend?" I asked instead.

"Mr. Garibaldi."

I didn't get it. "Interesting name for a duck."

She studied me. "Obvious name for a duck."

"If you say so."

"Never let Dustin know you don't get that reference. You'll be watching B5 for a week, and he'll make sure of it."

I'd only met Dustin a few times, and only in passing when he dropped Alana off for practice. The way Daria casually tossed the comment out there, as if a conversation like that was likely to come up in the future, warmed me in a way I didn't expect. "I'll keep that in mind."

I made my way completely into the tent-slash-cave, and sat across from her. “Roomy for a tiny home. Sits two comfortably.”

“I know what I’m doing. Sometimes. I thought I did.” She frowned and squeezed the duck tightly. “You don’t need to hear about that. How was your day?”

It was incredible. I wasn’t the one who needed to be listened to. “What happened?”

“Nothing. Not a big deal.”

Except a grown ass woman who I had never seen falter for more than a heartbeat, who always wore an air of having her shit together, had built herself a pillow fort and was squeezing the stuffing out of Mr. Ghirardelli as if he were her lifeline. “I hear it helps if you talk about it.”

She let out a bitter laugh and cut it off with the shake of her head. “I was just fired. That’s all.”

“I’m sorry.” That wasn’t the right answer. I should be asking why or how I could help or furious. That last one felt the most right, even without information. No one should—

“I’m still numb,” she said. “But that’s wearing off. You know how after the dentist, you can’t feel your lips, and then you know the Novocain is wearing off because there’s a tingle, but it doesn’t go away all at once and you know when it does it’s going to hurt and it’s this creeping sensation you want to prod at anyway, and just get to the pain faster?”

I nodded. Several responses tumbled to my lips but the *just listen* was the loudest voice in my head.

“I’m good at my job. I’m incredible at what I do. And it doesn’t matter. And then I think about all those nights I told Alana *maybe tomorrow* or begged her to read Harmony a

bedtime story so I could finish *just one more thing*.” Daria drew in a shuddering breath. “Because it would be better *tomorrow*. Because I had to work. For us.

“And now it doesn’t matter. Those assholes don’t care what I sacrificed. They only remember that *one fucking time when I was supposed to be on vacation* and I wasn’t at their beck and call. I know I’ll land on my feet, but I gave up so much. Why?” She looked at me as she asked the question, as if I might have more insight into her pain than she did.

I still remembered how much it hurt when I tore my rotator cuff at the Olympics. Not just physically, but the anguish I let myself wallow in over *why*? My heart had hurt for... I wasn’t sure it ever completely stopped.

I could tell her that. Use it as a basis for *I understand*.

But I also still remembered Colin helping me climb out of the depths of that pit, and how intently he’d always listened and only nudged when I needed a reply or a kick in the ass.

This felt more like the first one. “You’ve always done what you thought was right and best. That’s the most anyone can ask for.”

“But it wasn’t. I wasn’t. I missed so much.”

“But you didn’t.” I wasn’t just saying that to comfort her. “I hear the kids talk and I see how they interact with their parents. I know which moms and dads are going to hit on either Colin or me, and which parents we’ve never met because they always sent their kids to practice—to meets—with someone else. I know who berates, who brushes off, or barely glances at their children.”

Daria’s mouth was drawn in a straight line. “I assume you’re going somewhere with this.”

I was. “And I’ve never seen you do any of those things. You make it to every meet, even if it means coming home in the middle of a business trip. Alana and Harmony think the world of you. Harmony tells everyone her mom is the best mom in the world. And Alana never joins in the bitching about parents. And I realize there are things no one sees, behind closed doors, but... you put down sexy pillow fight time the instant they called last night.”

“Technically sexy pillow fight time never happened, and we’d already moved on.” Some of the shadows had faded from Daria’s expression, though.

I stretched my legs out in front of me and patted my thigh. She lay her head on my leg, still clutching the duck.

The silence was strange, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. I moved my hand, not aware of what I was doing until I touched her scalp, but she didn’t protest or try to pull away as I trailed my fingers through her hair.

Daria really was all those things I’d said, and more. She was this amazing woman I had so much respect for, and she looked so lost and vulnerable right now. That made her even more human and even more amazing, that she could be both.

I lost track of how long we sat there for. This was so simple. I’d never had this kind of closeness with anyone.

Except Colin.

The tiny disconnect—that I wanted this kind of intimacy from both of them—would fry my brain if I let it. That wasn’t fair to anyone, and I couldn’t dwell on the thought because right now wasn’t about me.

“You need to be pampered for the rest of the day,” I said softly.

Her dry chuckle surprised me. “I appreciate the sentiment.” She sat up and looked at me. “But that’s not what I need right now. Grab your laptop, I’ll clean off the table.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“You’re allowed to take the time to deal with this.”

Daria shook her head. “I need to feel wanted.” She snapped her jaw shut. “I mean... I need to be doing something and you have a business proposal to make sparkle and shine.”

An impulse raged inside to wrap her up, kiss her hard, and tell her I’d always want her.

Where the fuck did that come from?

It didn’t matter because she wouldn’t take a statement like that seriously. Besides, this wasn’t about sex, and I understood where she was coming from because I felt the same way after my injury.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.” I grasped her fingertips and brushed my lips over her knuckles.

No, really, what was I doing? It was a good thing I had Daria’s crisis to focus on because I had no idea what was going on in my own head.

colin

I WOULD'VE WRAPPED up the mural at the antique shop yesterday if Deacon hadn't needed to close up early. Which meant it didn't take long to finish the work once I arrived.

Barely enough time to linger on thoughts of last night. Way too much time to over-analyze Tanner's kisses and decisions and his choosing to stop.

Sure, I told him to.

But lump that decision into the over thinking bucket as well and I could call it a massive mess.

Those thoughts would wait. I stepped back to take a bigger picture look at my work. It wasn't perfect—as the artist, I saw every flaw and mistake—but hopefully Deacon would call it good enough.

“Holy shit. That's amazing.” His comment caught me off-guard. I hadn't realized he was there.

I wouldn't correct his perception; I learned a long time ago the customer saw things in a different light than I did when it came to my work. “Thanks. I'm calling it done, but if you see anything you'd like touched up or tweaked, I can do it.”

“No way.” He stepped up next to me. “I thought you were done a few hours ago, but each new detail... man you brought

this to life.”

The praise was nice. The paycheck would be good too. I pulled out my phone. “You okay with me taking a few pictures and adding them to my portfolio?”

“Yeah, of course.”

I took some close-ups of some of the more detailed work, then stepped back to get some wide angles. Deacon insisted on taking a few of me in front of the work as well, to post on his website.

“Seriously, incredible work. Brooke told me you were good, but you know.”

I did. “Sisters are biased.”

“Exactly. She undersold you, though. Hey, let me buy you a coffee, to celebrate a job well done.”

I hadn’t forgotten how heavily Deacon leaned into the flirting a few days ago. If I accepted his offer, would I be encouraging more of the same? And was it a big deal if I did? I was wild and free and having one-night stands. Sure, they meant more to me than they should, and I was going to deal with that. This was me loosening up.

“Just this once.” I kept my tone light and teasing.

Deacon and I headed across the street, grabbed our drinks, and took a spot in the back of the cafe, away from late morning chatter and early lunch stragglers.

He scooted his chair closer, so his knee touched mine when he leaned in. “Million-dollar question, how did you get into something like mural painting?”

It wasn’t a big grand story, but it was something only and Tanner and Brooke knew, because most people never asked. “I

went through a wild patch when I was younger. I was pissed off that I got shit for liking guys, but also for still liking girls. Like both sides hated me. So I expressed myself through painting.”

I’d much rather be telling Daria this story. The thought surprised me. But I’d finish sharing with Deacon since I’d already started.

“I get that.” Deacon sounded sincere and sympathetic. “I’m sorry you had to deal with it. But *murals*. Why so big?”

This was the part of the story I kept to myself. “I was a tagger. Graffiti artist. I left my signature everywhere, in the form of pictures. If the world didn’t want to see me, I was going to force them to.”

“Wow.” Deacon radiated awe.

I shook my head. “It’s not that impressive. The murals were a way to cover up the vandalism.”

Deacon chuckled. “Talented. Rebellious. Contentious. Sexy.” He covered my hand and his gaze drifted toward my crotch. “You really are the full package.”

And there was the not-subtle-at-all flirting again. I couldn’t do this. I wanted Tanner and Daria. I wanted more and more of the last two nights. Hooking up with someone else would either add another name to the *I can’t control my crushes* list, or more likely be a lie to myself and Deacon. “Listen, you’re a great guy...”

“Whoa.” Deacon pulled his hand away. “I know that tone. Are you about to friendzone me before we even become friends?”

I winced. “I’m about to be honest with you. I think we could be friends, but you’re not going to get more from me.”

“Huh.” Deacon scooted his seat back to where it had been, but he looked thoughtful rather than upset. “Yeah. Okay.”

That was disturbingly easy. “Just like that?”

“I dunno.” He shrugged. “I like the honesty. It’s sexy.” He frowned. “And friendly. And now I know, so I won’t push myself on you, and you don’t have to feel weird around me.”

Oh. Weird, but nice.

“So now what?” Deacon asked.

“Well, you can cut me a check and pretend we never met, or I can stay and we can finish our coffee.” Would I be having a conversation like this with Daria in a few days? With Tanner? *It was amazing sex, but let’s just go back to what we were.*

As easy as the conversation went with Deacon, the idea of saying something like that Tanner or Daria soured in my stomach.

“Let’s stay.” Deacon leaned back in his seat. “You can ask me the one thing you’ve been dying to since you showed up that first day.”

There was a question. “You get this one a lot?”

“Only from the perceptive people.”

“All right, the acronym for your shop...”

Deacon laughed. “Triple D. Yeah, it’s on purpose, and while I put a lot of thought into it, it’s not one of my finer decisions.”

“Because you’re all about the D?” I sipped my coffee. This was simple. Fun. No pressure. I liked it.

“Nah,” Deacon said. “I mean, yes, but also, like you, I’m more into the *why limit myself* idea. I’ll take a pair of nice double D’s, or a D, whatever.”

“I...” Words failed me.

Deacon tilted his head and studied me. “I think you’re blushing.”

“I think I’m both impressed and disturbed by your dedication to the hidden crudeness.”

“You have your art, I have mine,” Deacon said.

I laughed and shook my head. We talked a bit longer, he paid me, and I was on my way.

The conversation I’d had with him, the directness, that was exactly what I needed to do with Tanner. What I’d put off for way too long. I was going to do it—tell Tanner how I felt as soon as this week was over.

Though, did that push Daria out of our lives? What if it pushed Tanner away?

It didn’t matter. Rather, it did, but dragging things out in fear of an answer I didn’t want to hear wasn’t doing any of us any favors.

When I got back to the house, I was surprised to find Daria and Tanner at the kitchen table, crowded in between cushions and smaller furniture, both of them with their laptops up.

Tanner looked up, and grinned. “Grab your sketchpad. We need your help.”

“With what?” I was going to do it anyway, but I was curious.

“I need to take my mind off the fact that I was fired.”

I stared at Daria in disbelief. “I heard you wrong. Something was on fire?”

“You heard me right. My asshole ex-boss decided that he didn’t like me not working on my vacation, and he let me go.”

“He can’t do that.” I didn’t try to hide my anger on her behalf. “You’ve got legal recourse. You could sue his ass off. What kind of an idiot lets a talent like yours go?”

Amusement danced in her eyes, but it clashed with her sadness. “I’ve been thinking about the legal thing pretty much since I got the news. Deciding if I wanted to pursue it or if I want to move on. Both, I suppose. I don’t want to move on from the company, but I do want to cut ties with the asshole who fired me. And I want him to never do something like that to someone else again.”

“Good,” Tanner said. “I could also go punch him, if you want.”

“I do, but don’t do that.” Daria huffed out a short laugh. “But all the lawyers I know are because of the firm, so they can’t help me. Conflict of interest.”

How different would it be to have the kind of business contacts where one could casually say *all the lawyers I know*... but that wasn’t the point. “Brooke worked with a great divorce lawyer,” I offered.

Daria frowned and worked her jaw.

“I understand divorce is not employment law, or whatever it’s called, but I bet she can get a name for you. I’ll ask her.”

“Thank you. For everything.” Daria looked between us.

Tanner typed a few things on his laptop and looked up. “Because letting you fix our business plan and Colin calling

his sister are such rough tasks.”

“It’s the thought that counts.”

I’d never heard someone say that with so much sincerity. “You’re worth it.”

Daria blushed. “Go get your sketchpad. We need your genius to pull this all together.”

“Done.” I set my portfolio case on the ground, unzipped it, and pulled out the notebook in question, along with my favorite drafting pencil. “What are we doing?”

Tanner toed the chair closest to him toward me. “We need visuals for the remodels you would do to the rec center if you could. Not just the pool, but the classrooms and gym.”

I grinned and set to work. Tanner had mentioned the rest of the building, but his approach was so vague, I hadn’t put much stock in it. Today he had a grander vision, that I suspected Daria had helped him expand on. And I didn’t mind at all.

While I sketched, we also discussed activities for the kids who weren’t swimming, bringing on other instructors, and me offering a lot of feedback on how I thought it should all work.

It was incredible. I could see the project coming to life in a way I hadn’t for a long time.

We worked our way through the Chinese food leftovers, and Daria made cookies while we planned.

“I feel a little spoiled.” I meant it in the kindest way. “You’re doing all of this for us, plus cookies?”

She waved a hand. “Don’t be too impressed. I keep a tub of cookie dough in the fridge, and I would have eaten it raw, in a fit of frustration, if the two of you weren’t here to keep me busy.”

The whisper of sadness in her voice was obvious, but she moved on to the next subject before I could push the issue.

It was almost eight at night when we finished, but Tanner and I had a fully revised business plan and I felt great about the future of the project. Of everything, really.

“I’d prefer to keep out of the living room for one more night, since the carpet is still damp,” Daria said.

I liked where the thought was going. “We’d probably better stay in your room again tonight, if that’s the case.”

Tanner clapped me on the shoulder. “What did I tell you? Idea guy, right here.”

I was grinning as I put away my sketchpad. I knocked a box loose, and it clattered to the floor.

“What’s that?” Daria asked as I reached for it.

Tanner got to it first. “Edible body paint?”

I shrugged. “It was a gag gift, and I’ve never figured out what to do with it. It’s paint, so it goes with the paint supplies.” Probably a good thing that was knocked loose here, and not at Deacon’s. Inspiration struck. “I have the perfect idea for it now, though.”

“You’re on a roll tonight,” Tanner said. “Do tell.”

This was the point where I should put a pause on things and say *hey, where’s all of this going between the three of us after this week?* But I wasn’t in the mood to ruin this moment. I fixed my gaze on Daria. “I have the perfect canvas in mind.”

daria

WHEN COLIN SAID he had the perfect canvas for his paints, my pulse kicked up in anticipation. My brain hadn't caught up to why, until Colin looked at me.

“Tell me Daria doesn't have the perfect body for a mural,” he said.

Tanner dragged his gaze over me. “She really does.”

Heat flooded my body. “I don't...”

“You can say no.” Colin was really so sweet.

That wasn't my issue, though. “I want to say *yes*, I just don't know how body painting works.”

“We need an old sheet or towels for the bed. Something you don't mind staining,” Tanner said.

Colin nodded. “Then you strip down so I can do the actual painting.”

“Then we get to appreciate the final artwork.” Tanner made it sound so simple and obvious.

The spark of desire pooling in my belly and traveling lower thought it was anything but simple. I loved the idea, though.

If we were in a porn, the cut would have taken us past the next few minutes of trooping up the stairs, finding an old comforter, and covering the bed. How did such a simple but awkward series of actions raise my desire even higher?

Standing in my bedroom with Tanner and Colin, heat spilling through me, was already becoming addictively familiar. Tanner studied me with a playful smirk as he fiddled with the button on my jeans. I didn't get the impression he was struggling so much as having fun.

Colin tugged my shirt over my head, and kissed along my bare shoulder. "Absolutely perfect canvas." As he unhooked my bra, Tanner pushed my jeans and panties to the ground.

Standing in the middle of my own room naked felt weird. They'd seen me without my clothes, but this was different. We weren't wrapped up in kissing and groping, and my stretch marks and less than perky breasts and cesarean scar were all on display.

I hugged myself, suddenly self-conscious.

Tanner tugged one of my arms down. "What's wrong?"

"This feels strange."

"We can't have that. What do you propose?"

I only saw one real solution. "That I'm not the only naked one."

"The artist usually keeps his clothes on." Colin traced a finger along my arm. "But I think it's a fair request."

There was nothing fancy about the way they stripped out of their clothes, but I enjoyed watching it as much as I'd liked having it done to me. And staring at them naked in their full glory took my mind off my own nudity.

Colin walked a small circle around me, raking his gaze over me in a way that was as delicious as any touch. “I think I need you standing for this.” He handed the paints to Tanner. “My trusty assistant will help me.”

I expected Tanner to protest the term. Instead, he opened the red paint, dipped his finger in, and dragged the color in a vertical strip down my bottom lip and chin. He dragged his tongue over the stripe, licking the color away before pressing his mouth to mine.

“Is it cherry flavored?” I asked against his kiss.

He drew away. “It’s red flavored. It’s you flavored. It’s my new favorite flavor.”

And now I was probably completely red, without any more paint.

“I’ll draw the lines, you fill them in?” Colin looked at Tanner.

Tanner grinned. “With pleasure.”

A shiver of anticipation raced down my spine.

Colin used his fingers to draw a series of flowing lines that became vines and roses. He trailed along my breasts and stomach, around my thighs, and back up again. Each stroke was cool paint mixed with the heat of his touch.

While he moved in effortless creation, Tanner’s lingering on the details made me want to squeeze my thighs together. That would have stopped Colin’s progress though.

The longer they spent *painting* me, the harder it was to not squirm. Especially seeing them both erect, their cocks brushing me each time one of them leaned in.

When they finished, they both stepped back.

“Absolutely stunning.” The way Tanner looked me over, I felt like a statue of a Greek goddess. “So’s the art, my friend.”

Colin looked smug. “Told you. *Perfect* canvas.”

“Even better, you’re edible.” Tanner pressed two paint covered fingers to my lips.

I pulled them into my mouth and dragged my tongue along the pads, sucking him clean. His throaty groan and the way his eyelids fluttered half open cranked my desire higher.

He dragged his fingers down my chin, following the same path with a line of kisses, licking when he reached the paint along my collarbone.

Colin dropped his head to trace his tongue along one breast. He drew a nipple into his mouth and sucked.

The two of them spent more time licking me clean than they had painting me, occasionally drifting closer to share a spot, their tongues tangling with each other. By the time they reached my thighs, my pussy was begging for attention.

Tanner kissed back up my hip and to my back, until he was nipping at my neck, and sucking on the soft skin where it met my shoulder. He slipped two fingers between my legs, teasing over my skin, but not penetrating or offering relief.

Colin crushed his mouth to mine, and his erection pressed into my stomach. He followed, never breaking the kiss, when Tanner yanked my head back to expose more of my neck.

I needed something to do. To hold onto. I wrapped my hand around Colin’s shaft, and his long moan undid me. If they could tease, so could I. Adjusting my stance slightly, I dragged the head of Colin’s cock along my slit. When I bumped my clit, we groaned in unison.

Tanner let go of my hair, and slipped his fingers inside me, drawing a gasp from me.

A woman could only hold out for so long. I stroked Colin, using his tip to tease myself. The harder I pumped, the closer I slid to climax. He gripped my hips. His lips parted and his breathing came in short pants, matching mine, as I masturbated both of us.

Orgasm slammed into me and I clenched around Tanner's fingers, never letting up on Colin. His grunts came harder and faster. I already recognized the sound of his mounting release. When he came, he covered my hand, my body.

I slowed to a stop as we both shuddered from *too much*, and he claimed my mouth again as if we were each other's lifelines.

"Fuck." Tanner's exclamation rumbled through my back. He slipped out of me, and reached past me to grip Colin's neck. I moved aside enough to not get caught in their kiss.

Colin met Tanner's gaze with an unspoken question that charged the air, and I swore Tanner's faint nod was a spark that lit up the room. Colin kissed down Tanner's chest, already fisting his cock.

And I made myself comfortable on the old bedspread, to enjoy every minute of the show.

tanner

I WAS DROWNING. Gasping for air, and Colin and Daria were my lifelines. His mouth. Her hungry gaze. I needed both to stay afloat.

Colin dragged his lips down my chest, and nipped his teeth over one of my nipples before flicking the nub with his tongue.

I didn't know where one groan stopped and the next started, but I did know I was rock hard.

And then he was on knees in front of me, looking up at me with eyes I could fall into forever.

I knotted my fingers in the short strands of his hair in response. This was sex between friends, and I was going to enjoy the hell out of it.

He lightly trailed his tongue along my cock. *Fuuuuuck*. I was so turned on, I almost came when he took me in his mouth.

Colin teased me with a slow, steady blend of licking, sucking, and stroking. Between it all, he fingered my sac.

This was incredible, but I was past the point of wanting to draw things out. I tightened my grip on his hair, and thrust my hips.

Colin responded with enthusiasm, not protesting when I hit the back of his throat, and bobbing his head as I fucked his face.

Need clenched inside me, tightening in my balls. I wanted this to last longer, but I also wanted that sweet release. “I’m so close.” I managed to grunt out the words.

My warning seemed to spur Colin on. His hunger combined with Daria’s soft moans to yank and break my last threads of restraint.

I closed my eyes and leaned back my head. Light exploded behind my eyelids when I came, leaving stars dancing in my vision. I spilled down Colin’s throat, pumping until every touch was too much before I finally forced myself to pull away.

Daria shifted on the bed, lying on her stomach as she kissed Colin hard.

I watched with aching desire as they shared my taste. *Fuck* that was delicious to watch.

When the two of them broke apart, all three of us collapsed on the bed, Daria and Colin curling up on either side of me. We lay there for I didn’t even know how long, catching our breath. When we finally untangled enough to clean up, the washcloth I traced along Daria’s skin didn’t lift off the lingering traces of body paint.

“It doesn’t matter.” Her tiny smile seemed fixed in place. *Stunning*. “It’ll fade in a few days, and until then, I’ll remember now every time I see it.”

“I hope you’ll remember anyway,” I teased.

Her laugh was musical. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

We reluctantly dressed, and Daria decided that with the old blanket already in place, it was the perfect time to eat popcorn in bed and watch more Game of Thrones.

As we were settling in, the heavenly smell of butter and salt in the air, my good news from earlier rushed back. “I almost forgot.”

“That we need ice cream?” Daria asked.

I glanced at Colin, who shrugged, so I looked at Daria again. “With the popcorn or after?”

She grinned. “It’s a thing Harmony does. She says *I almost forgot*, and when you ask what, she says *we should have ice cream*.”

That was freaking adorable. And something about the casual way Daria shared the memory felt intimate, as if we were part of her family. I liked it. “I’m in for ice cream, but that’s not what I was talking about. I made my time this morning. I’m going to the Olympic trials in a few weeks to see if I can make the team.”

“*Yeah*.” Colin clapped me on the back. “I can see it now, painted under our school’s name. *Featuring Olympic Medalist...*” He wiped his hand across the air as he spoke.

I was as pleased with his reaction as I was with my news. He was into the school idea again, and that was perfect.

“You’ll have to send us postcards,” Daria said. “Alana desperately wants to go to Tokyo, and I’ve told her not until Harmony is older.”

“I promise, lots of postcards.”

We settled in to watch the show, and like last night we had an amazing time laughing and both enjoying and making fun

of what was happening.

I didn't want this to end. It had to though. After this week, this would be a memory and nothing more. So for tonight, I was memorizing it.

THREE NIGHTS in a row of some of the most fun I'd ever had. The sex was incredible, but the company was amazing regardless.

And waking up in the same bed as Daria and Colin was my new favorite way to start a morning.

Colin and I made Daria stay in bed, and made her breakfast. We took our time feeding each other strawberries and regretting that I hadn't poured the juice into sippy cups, when we had to leave it on the nightstand, and just enjoying each other's company.

I didn't want this to end, but after tomorrow, Colin and I would be back in our place and life would go back to normal.

I might as well enjoy it all now, while I could.

A creak from downstairs greeted us, and Daria jerked upright with a frown. "That was the front door."

Where was the nearest weapon?

"*Mom.*" Alana's call carried easily up the stairs. "We're home."

"Fuck me." Panic flooded Daria's expression.

No kidding. Colin and I were on our feet in an instant, pulling on clothes, tossing Daria her T-shirt, and making the

bed look at least a little like only one person had been sleeping in it.

At the sound of the bedroom doorknob turning, nausea surged in my gut. At least we were all decent when Alana walked in the room.

She froze, eyes wide and mouth open, then let out the most painful, ear-splitting screech I'd ever heard.

20

colin

IN FRONT OF DARIA'S, Tanner made a quick call to the apartment management office and made sure we were okay to go back to our apartment. With confirmation, we headed *home*.

I arrived there about the same time he did. It hadn't even been five days, but it felt weird coming back here. Inside the apartment, the faint smell of something peppery hung in the air, and we opened the windows immediately.

Neither of us had said much of anything. Was his mind racing as much as mine was? "I hope Daria's all right," I finally said.

Tanner fidgeted with his fingers, rubbing them together. "She's never mentioned that her ex was abusive. Neither has Alana. Do you think she might be in trouble? We shouldn't have left. If he hurts her..."

His concern was adorable and as far as I knew, completely misplaced. "I meant emotionally, you neanderthal. She looked so stressed."

"I know." Tanner sighed and sank onto the couch. "And did you hear that scream of Alana's?"

“She’s going to hate us forever.” I didn’t like the thought of having disappointed a student. I really didn’t like thinking about the tension in that house when we left. And the things her ex had been saying to her... This was one of those rare moments when I understood why someone might punch someone else.

Tanner was on his feet again, pacing the short distance of the living room. “I need to do something.”

We’d walked out of Daria’s with our wallets, keys, and phones. Our laptops were still there, and a week’s worth of clothing. There was one thing I wanted to do. Well, two, but the second was probably driven by stress and may happen after the first. After I was finally honest with Tanner about how I felt.

As I opened my mouth, my phone rang. Daria’s name flashed on the screen. “Thank God,” I muttered, and answered. “Are you all right?”

Tanner fixed his attention on me with the question, and his feet stopped moving.

“I’m fine.” Daria’s voice leaked stress. “Will you give this same message to Tanner?”

“Of course.” I’d offer to put her on speaker, but there was a reason she called me.

She sighed. “You can come pick up your things anytime, just give me ten minutes warning. And...” Another sigh, that sounded like her trying to exhale the weight of the world. “This week was so much fun, but things need to go back to the way they were. We can’t do things like that anymore.”

“Is this because of Joe?” I winced as the question passed my lips, and Tanner clenched his jaw. “I didn’t mean that. I’m

sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She had gone from stressed to sounding flat. “And no, it’s because of the girls. I can’t disrupt their lives like that.”

We won’t be a disruption. Your kids are awesome. But that implied a commitment that went beyond what we had. “I understand. We’ll text you before we come by, and it’ll probably be later today.”

“Let me talk to her,” Tanner growled.

Not sure that was a good idea.

“It was fun. Bye.” Daria hung up.

I stared at my phone. This was always going to happen. Maybe not in this way, but there was no universe where we did anything but went our separate ways at the end of the way. I’d wanted more so badly though, that I’d convinced myself otherwise. My mistake.

At the self-confession, an empty pit opened up in my heart. What did I think was going to happen though? That we’d move in with Daria and be one big happy family? Because of a few days of incredible sex and other fun?

“What did she say?” Tanner’s question jarred me.

I looked up, studying his face. Those gorgeous eyes I’d lost myself in more times than he’d ever realize. Those lips... *God*, it was incredible kissing him. I couldn’t let him get away without telling him.

“*Colin.*” His voice was more insistent. “What did she say?”

I conveyed her brief message, still having a harder time grasping the words than I wanted to.

“How could she think... There was something there with her.”

Tanner’s retort echoed my thoughts in a way I didn’t want them to. So why did they also rub me wrong?

“I thought this was just a fling. Casual sex between three friends,” I said.

“It may have started that way, but she means a lot more.”

That was what I didn’t like—the qualifiers. This wasn’t the way I wanted to do this. I wanted to sit down and have a sweet conversation with Tanner, where I said *I love you* and he said *me too*. But this was where we were. “Was it just sex with me, or do I mean something more too?”

The way Tanner stared at me made my gut sink.

“Because it meant more to me,” I said. “*You* mean more to me.”

“What do you...?” Tanner frowned.

Abort. Abort. But it was too late. I was The Titanic, set on course I couldn’t possibly change in time, toward an iceberg that would destroy me. “It wasn’t just sex to me. Not with her. Especially not with you. God, I love you Tanner. I have for years, and I didn’t think you felt the same way, but after the last few days, how can you... We’ve known each other forever. How could you say it meant something with her but not with me?”

“Because you’re—”

“Your pal? Your buddy? A man?” I didn’t want to hear what he was going to say. it would hurt too much.

“You say all that like it’s a bad thing. Your friendship means the world to me,” Tanner said. “And yeah, the sex was

incredible, and it sure as fuck turned Daria on.”

Were the fumes making my head spin or was that my disbelief and self-disgust for seeing what wasn't there. “It didn't do anything for you. You dumped your load down my throat because Daria thought it was hot, and that was it?”

“I don't know what to say Colin. You're my best friend, and I'd be lost without that. I'm not even ashamed to say I love you, but not like that. This isn't romantic.”

Could he hear my heart breaking? Unlikely. And as much as I wanted to yell at Tanner for being an idiot, this was my fault. I saw more than was there. What I wanted rather than what he said. He'd never lied to me.

“Colin?” The way Tanner watched me with concern gutted me further.

Was I only in this friendship hoping he'd put out, or was I here because he was my friend no matter what? “This is on me. But... I need to not be around you right now. Don't harass Daria when you go pick up your stuff.”

I walked out the front door, letting it swing shut on one more call of, “*Colin.*”

That went better than I'd always feared, and not nearly as good as I hoped. Especially after these past few days. I let out a bitter laugh, and a neighbor walking her dog gave me a weird look.

Whatever.

Being alone would suck, because I'd be stuck listening to my thoughts, but where was I supposed to go that I wouldn't be reminded of Tanner?

I sent Daria a quick text saying I'd be by soon to grab my things. That couldn't be put off. As I climbed into my car, I called Brooke. The instant I heard her line pick up I said, "Please don't make any Tanner jokes."

"Good morning to you too." Brooke's greeting was cautiously chipper. "And why not?"

I took a deep breath and started the car. How best to put this? "I told him."

"And...? Oh. Oh, Colin."

The tone of my voice had definitely given me away. Good. That meant less to explain.

"I'm so sorry," Brooke said. "What can I do?"

"Tell me you need help with something. Anything. And maybe let me crash on your couch for a few days?"

"I do. You may. And how bad is this? Did you break up?"

I winced at her phrasing, and pointed my car toward Daria's.

"I didn't mean it that way," Brooke said. "How bad is it? Does a few days mean that, or is it more of an indefinite request? You're welcome regardless, but if you think you're going to be a while, you need to help me clear out my craft room."

"I'll straighten your fucking garage if it'll keep my mind busy." I didn't know anyone more driven than Brooke, besides Daria. My sister's entire life looked put together on the outside, as long as one didn't open the doors she kept locked. That was both literal and metaphorical. Not that I had a problem with either. "And I don't know how long. I didn't *break up* with him. I just need some space."

Brooke clucked. “I have plenty you can help with and you can stay as long as you want.”

I *wanted* to be staying with Tanner. I wanted to be cuddled up with him right now, because he felt the same way I did, while we figured out how to help Daria and where he and I went next. But that wasn't what I was getting. “Thank you.”

daria

HARMONY CAME DOWN around noon to ask if she could have breakfast for lunch. They were supposed to have Mickey Mouse pancakes today, and she didn't get any. Saying *yes* was the easiest decision ever.

Telling Colin and Tanner our relationship needed to go back to what it had been should have been just as simple. So why did I feel like I was giving up more than just amazing sex?

I wasn't anywhere near the artist Colin was, but a big circle of pancake with two smaller circles for ears, and banana slices plus chocolate chips for eyes, and Harmony had her Mickey Mouse pancakes. I even gave one a bow of strawberries so she'd have a Minnie.

"*Yay.*" Harmony clapped when she saw the food.

Alana was more sullen, never looking at me or saying a word. I was happy she came down at all, so I was calling it a win.

Harmony told me about every minute of Disneyland Day One as she ate. I was sad I hadn't been there, but I was glad she had the memories.

“But Mom.” Harmony put down her fork and looked at me with a serious expression.

“Yes?”

“We didn’t get to spend very much time at California Adventure. Alana wanted to go on more rides.”

Alana rolled her eyes, pushed back from the table, and stalked upstairs. A door slammed shut.

Harmony frowned. “She didn’t take her plate to the sink.”

“I don’t think your sister’s feeling well.” I winced inwardly at the tiny untruth. “You can help me with dishes. Like Cinderella.”

“But you’re not evil, Mom.”

Bless her.

When we were done, Harmony skipped back to her room to introduce her new Dumbo stuffie to SpongeBob.

I kept myself busy with polishing my resume and sending word out through a few close friends that I was looking for new work. The tasks didn’t keep me from wondering how to get Alana to talk to me, and worrying about her didn’t stop me from wanting to pick up the phone and redefine things with Colin and Tanner to keep the sex in our lives.

I was horrible.

A little before five, Dustin called. “Everything all right there?” he asked when I answered.

That wasn’t suspicious at all. “Why?”

“Alana called me and told me she and Harmony were coming to live with me.”

Fuck. At least she hadn’t called Joe.

“I thought they were supposed to be in California for a couple more days. What happened?” Dustin said.

I gave him the high-level list, keeping things extra vague around, “I slept with my house guests,” and culminating with, “At least we were all dressed when Alana walked in the room.” I didn’t have much energy left to keep the story emotionless, and my voice cracked on those last words.

“Dar...”

“Don’t.” I stopped him at his kind tone. “I don’t want sympathy or pity or even understanding. I fucked up.”

He sighed. “You do the best you can. You do better than most.”

“Not a high bar, Dustin.”

“How about this, then? I’ll loan you my girlfriend for the night.”

I scowled at the phone. Now he was making fun of me, despite the lack of teasing in his voice. “I can’t see how that’s going to do anything except make the situation worse.”

Dustin chuckled. “Not like that. Call Carly. Addie’s already calling Luna and Reese. Go out for the night. No pressure. Just some unwinding. Leave Alana and Harmony here, and clear your head.”

“Ignoring reality is what got me into this.” Guilt gnawed me at the simple thought of doing what he suggested. Having fun when the world around me was falling apart? Nope.

“You’re not ignoring things. You’re approaching the situation from a different angle.”

I couldn’t.

“Are you going to sit at home and sulk instead?” Dustin’s question was kind. “If Alana isn’t talking to you, she may talk to me.”

I did need to give Alana some space, and I needed it to not be with Joe.

“I’ll spoil them while they’re here. Give them too much ice cream.” He was a master at walking that fine line between just enough and too much spoiling.

“They had to come home from Disneyland early, and caught their mom all but naked with two men. They need therapy, not ice cream.”

“I’ll give them candy, too,” Dustin said.

I almost smiled. Dustin would give them positive attention, without trying to turn them against me. “I’ll drop them off in a little bit.” And then come back here and try to find a solution.

I headed upstairs, and knocked on Alana’s door.

Nothing.

“Dustin called me. You can go to his house for the night,” I called through the door.

She opened it with a scowl. “Or until I’m old enough to get my own place.”

Words. I’d take words. “You know Dustin has a boyfriend and a girlfriend.” Why did I take that approach? It wasn’t as if Tanner and Colin were my boyfriends.

Alana’s scowl deepened. “Adrienne and Phillip aren’t my swim coaches, and Dustin isn’t my mom. When people hook up and then break up, other people get hurt in the process.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.” And now my heart was breaking.

“Too late. I’ll be in the car.” She grabbed her backpack from behind the door, and brushed past me.

Harmony wasn’t happy about being bundled off without warning for a second time today, but I let her bring Dumbo and Mr. Garibaldi with her, and that helped her feel better.

When I dropped the girls at Dustin’s, Adrienne was waiting too. These days she spent most of her time either at his place or Phillip’s, but I suspected all three of them would be living together sooner rather than later.

“Come on.” Adrienne hooked her arm in mine and led me back to the car. “He’s got this.”

Dustin was the one person I wasn’t worried about. “Where are we going?”

“Back to your place. You’re a mess. Sorry. Not in a bad way. You need comfy clothes. A ponytail. A margarita.” Adrienne wasn’t great at filtering her thoughts.

I was fine with that. “I’m not sitting at home drinking.”

“You’re going to sit at home and sulk sober instead? We’re not staying there.” she said. She took my keys and phone from me. “Unlock this.”

“Why?” I pressed my thumb to the bottom button on the phone anyway.

She typed on the screen, paused, and typed some more after each chime. When she was done, she handed the device back. “Carly and Reese are going to meet us there. Luna’s already got plans.”

“Meet us where?” I asked as Adrienne nudged me toward the passenger seat.

She slid behind the wheel. “Grumpy’s.”

A local sports bar-slash-family restaurant. “On a Friday night?”

“Loud enough you don’t have to think if you don’t want. Lots of comfort food. Froofy booze if you change your mind about drinking.”

“Sounds nauseating.”

Adrienne shrugged and started the car. “You’re kind of setting yourself up for an *I want to be miserable* kind of night anyway, might as well let someone else do the cooking.”

I didn’t have a comeback.

Back at home, I pulled on clothes that would be acceptable in public, wincing at my reflection when I caught the hint of faint green vines and red roses on my breasts and stomach.

At the restaurant, Adrienne, Carly, and Reese kept up the conversation through drink orders—water for me—and the first round of endless chips and salsa.

I was grateful I’d already told Carly about work, so I didn’t need to deal with her sympathy for that on top of everything else. She’d insisted she was quitting too, and I made her promise not to. I had a bad experience with one partner, one she rarely had to deal with, and she loved her job.

Carly snapped her fingers in front of my face. “Earth to Daria. You home?”

“I’m sorry, what?” Did they ask me something? I shook my head, trying to clear away the fog.

Adrienne pursed her lips. “Who would win in a fight between Barney the Purple Dinosaur, and the yellow Teletubby.”

“Laa-Laa,” I corrected her before the rest of my brain caught up. “Wait, what? No you weren’t.”

Reese snorted. “Because the purple one would kick all their asses. Obviously.”

“Barney is purple too,” Carly said.

“But Barney is a dinosaur, which means he’s extinct, and Teletubbies are English. One still exists one doesn’t.” Adrienne’s logic made more sense than I wanted it to.

“Really, what were we talking about?”

Adrienne sipped her drink. Did she get more reserved when she was drunk instead of less? Be interesting to find out. “How to pull you back to our world.”

“She’s just dick-stracted.” Carly looked pleased with her own joke.

Adrienne looked at her wide-eyed and shook her head. “We’re not talking about that.”

“About what?” Reese asked. “It’s rude to keep secrets in a group like this.”

“About the two sexy swim coaches who turned her into a cougar,” Carly said.

I sighed. Apparently we were talking about it. “It was just a one-time thing.” The words tasted rancid, and I tried to wash them down with water. I should’ve gotten a drink, but then I’d down it and want another and another.

Carly stared at me. “But you were so happy yesterday morning.”

“Two younger men at once, who wouldn’t be?” Reese wasn’t drinking either. At least I was in good company. I had a hard time getting a read on her; she was flashy and direct and stunning and had an amazing voice, but she rarely talked about herself and frequently seemed like she was holding part of herself back.

“Her kids walked in on them.” Adrienne winced and snapped her mouth shut.

Yup. No filter. “It wasn’t that bad. But Alana’s old enough to know what we’d been up to.”

Carly sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth. “Ouch.”

“It’s fine.” I didn’t sound the least bit convincing. “One time thing, like I said. As long as Alana forgives me.”

Reese huffed and nibbled on a chip.

“You have thoughts?” If we were going to dissect my life at the dinner table, we might as well go all in.

Reese shrugged. “Too many people are willing to give up love for fleeting moments.” She sounded like she spoke from experience.

Irritation rankled over me. “This is not love, and my girls are *not* fleeting moments.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Reese held up her hands, as if in surrender. “But kids *are* adaptable and what pisses them off today makes them happy tomorrow. Yours already understand what’s going on with Adrienne, Dustin, and Phillip. Unless you think their lifestyle is unnatural.”

I glared at her. “You’re making a lot of assumptions.” I looked at Adrienne. “You know I don’t have any problems with you at all, don’t you? And I don’t have an issue with the girls being around it, and I love that they understand it.”

“I know.” Adrienne nodded. “I also get that introducing new people directly into your home is different. Alana’s obviously already attached, and if things go bad... I get it.”

At least someone did. “Exactly. Which is why I’ve ended it. One. Time. Thing.” If I said it often enough, I might convince myself. Something occurred to me. I turned to Carly. “You’re being awfully quiet.”

“Because you don’t want to hear it.”

Might as well. Everyone else had said their piece. “Try me.”

Carly twisted her mouth. “I’m with Reese on this one—the intent not the poor choice of words. Being married to Joe fucked with you. But yesterday? The only time I’ve ever seen you that happy was when your kids were born. You’ve never smiled like that when you’re talking about a relationship. But I also know you’re more in touch with yourself than pretty much anyone. You’re so fucking self-aware that it’s beauty and pain at the same time. If you’re telling yourself this is the right decision, you know you best.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t come across as smugly as I wanted, because I was still trying to convince myself I was making the right decision to dial my relationship back with Colin and Tanner.

It had been less than a day. My body was still riding the high of the levels of attention they gave me. Once I had some

time and distance, I'd be able to admit I loved the praise more than the individuals.

And for tonight, I'd take a tipsy Adrienne back to Dustin's, and I'd crash on his couch so I could be there in the morning to start making things up to Alana.

tanner

I WAS surprised and relieved when Colin showed up to swim class on Saturday. He arrived after a few of the students, which didn't leave me time to talk to him in private, but he was all smiles with the kids.

He was exactly the person I knew, and had grown up with...

And had never realized how he felt about me.

The thought slammed into my head, the way it had been over and over since yesterday. It didn't bring any additional insight, so I shoved it aside, the way I had over and over since yesterday.

Class went as smoothly as normal, with one tiny difference. Whenever I asked Colin something directly, or started a conversation with him, his expression would go flat and the little crinkles would vanish from around his eyes.

He always answered, though.

When our time with the students was up, I grabbed his attention. "Can we talk?" I asked.

"About what?" His tone was friendly but cool.

About how I feel about you. But those words stuck in my throat because I didn't know what came after. "About something. Anything."

"I can't. I've gotta run. Maybe next time."

I followed him to the locker room, but instead of changing, he pulled on a T-shirt, grabbed his bag, and headed out in his still-damp trunks.

Maybe he just needed time. I didn't want this gap to exist between us at all, though.

When I pulled my phone from my locker, there was a message waiting for me, from a number I didn't recognize.

"This is Carly," the woman said. "Daria gave me your number, and I'd like to talk. Give me a call back."

Daria. The name sent a flash of hope rushing through me. The feeling didn't erase my stuckness over the Colin situation, but it did give me a glimmer of hope to focus on. Daria had said Carly was her best friend. This had to be promising.

I dialed Carly's number without hesitation. When she answered I said, "This is Tanner Hagen. You left me a message about Daria?"

"Sort of," Carly said. "She asked me to give you a call and talk to you about a building appraisal? I'm hoping we can find a time you can show me this rec center you're looking at."

Oh. Right. "I'm not sure, but I can call the owner and see what his schedule is like. When can I call you back?"

"This is nothing formal. It only needs to be you, so I can tell you if the property is worth pursuing or not. You'll get an official appraisal from your lending bank. If you have keys, let

me know when you're free, and you can take me on a walk through."

I didn't want to go back to an empty apartment, and if this was Daria's friend, maybe I could extract a little *how is she* information at the same time. "Is it too much to hope for now?"

"I guess I can catch up on *The Bachelor* another time." Carly's huff was loud, but her voice was light.

"Are you sure? You're not dying to find out who she chooses?"

Carly clucked. "I'm hoping she picks them all, but given the number of episodes left, that seems unlikely. I can be there in an hour if that works."

"I'll be here." That gave me an hour to kill, and that meant maybe I could lose myself in swimming.

Lap after lap, my mind certainly stayed fixed on a single point, but not my time or form. I was looping on the conversation—or lack thereof—with Colin. When I tried to shove that aside, thoughts of Daria were waiting to take its place.

Three days of screwing around—literally and otherwise—and I was hooked on both of them. But it was more than that. I had something with each of them before this week too. A solid bond, a real friendship, but was it more? The three of us were good together.

Life looked dreary when I tried to imagine a future without either of them in it.

I reached the end of a lap, came up for air, and realized there was a woman standing a few feet back from the pool.

When I wiped the water from my eyes, I saw frosted hair, a stunning figure, and her crossed arms.

I climbed from the pool, and I knew without looking that she took the opportunity to look me over while I dried off. I held up a hand to indicate I needed a moment, and when I finished she was still watching me.

And a week ago, as long as she wasn't a student's parent, I would have seized the opportunity to see how deep her appreciation ran. Today, there was no interest. I joined her. "Can I help you?"

"Now I know at least one thing she sees in you." She extended her hand. "Carly. We spoke on the phone."

"Tanner." I shook her hand, but my mind was on her comment. That meant Daria had talked about me in a way that evoked that kind of response. "I appreciate you taking the time to do this."

"I'd do a lot for Daria. This is no big deal though. Do you want to give me the grand tour, and I'll tell you when I need to see more or less?"

I nodded, and gestured. "This is the pool."

She laughed. "Thanks. I might not have figured that out." Her voice was teasing. "Make sure I don't fall in."

I stepped away long enough to pull on some clothes. It took a few hours to go through the entire building, and I was grateful for the distraction. Carly was good at keeping up a train of small talk, and unfortunately even better at steering the conversation from Daria every time I asked.

Carly wanted to look closer at, and take pictures of things I hadn't put much thought into. Tile and paint and the basement. I was worried she'd home in on the chlorine smell in the

classrooms, but she assured me that was an HVAC issue, and it appeared to be fixable.

We were at the far end of the building, in the large gymnasium no one had used in years for anything but stacking chairs, when she proclaimed she was done.

“How serious is it, doc?” I tried to keep my voice light, but braced myself for the news that this place was worth more torn down and rebuilt.

She flipped through her notebook, and thumbed through her phone. “I did some research on this place yesterday. On the existing owner and financing terms, the building’s history, and more.”

“Okay?”

Carly finally looked at me. “The owner is telling the truth. The place needs some work, and I mean *a lot* of work, but none if it is structural.”

“So why...” I thought back to the conversation with Davenport, who was so insistent that the place was utter shit. “A banker told me not to bother.”

“Ah. That’s one of the things I found in my research. There’s a clause in the existing loan that if the building falls into a certain level of disrepair, the bank can foreclose. My guess is, your guy is desperate to sell, before that happens, so he doesn’t lose his equity.”

Holy shit. “Son of bitch.”

Carly shrugged. “Bankers are bastards.”

“So what do I do?” I was trying to keep my hope subdued. This didn’t erase my current issues, but it was nice to have a bright spot. As long as she didn’t shatter it.

Carly pulled a card from her purse and handed it to me. “Reach out to this guy—he’s not as much of a bastard as most, I promise—and tell him you consulted with Daria and she referred you. Show him your proposal, and make an offer on the building that’s more than the asking price.”

“That’s a lot of money.”

“The building is worth more. Or it will be once you put your ideas into place. Never fuck someone over on property—Karma’s a bitch.”

I couldn’t help but hope that was true for Davenport. “Thank you. Now will you tell me how Daria is?”

“No. I’m sure you’ll see her when she drops Alana off at practice.”

I had my doubts. “Just a hint?”

“If she wanted you to know, she’d tell you. I’m sorry. She’s made her decision.”

Fuck fuck fuck. “At least ask her to call me?”

Carly shook her head. “Do you think she hasn’t already considered that? I really am sorry, but I will side with her every time, and this is what she’s doing.” Carly truly did sound sorry.

Daria wouldn’t talk to me. Colin wouldn’t talk to me.

I was getting everything I ever thought I wanted, but without them, the joy felt flat.

daria

DUSTIN MUST HAVE SAID something to Alana because she was talking to me again. Not a lot of words, but the venom behind them was gone. She almost seemed contemplative.

I let the girls plan our Saturday and Sunday, telling them they had to share the schedule. We shopped, we watched movies, and we went to the batting cages.

Sunday night, Harmony gave me a hug as I was putting her into bed and told me I was the best mom she'd ever had. The sentiment was sweet enough I decided not to ask for her to clarify.

When I walked out of Harmony's room and closed the door behind me, Alana was waiting in the hall.

"Mom? You give up a lot for us, don't you?"

I didn't know where the question came from, but I didn't like the phrasing. "Everything I do for you, I do because I want to."

"But if we weren't here, you'd be doing other things."

What the hell? "What's with the questions?"

Alana grabbed one arm with her other hand. "Have you dated since you and Joe got divorced?"

“Don’t call your father by his first name.”

“You do. And you’re not answering my questions.” She finally looked at me.

I tried to be as honest with my girls as possible, but how much of this conversation did I want to have with her? “I’ve seen people, yes.”

“But we’ve never met any of them,” Alana said.

Because fuckbuddies didn’t come home with me. Thoughts of Tanner and Colin assaulted me, and I swallowed down any reaction before it could leak into the conversation. “I haven’t been close enough with any of them.”

“Oh. Do I have to stop going to swimming lessons?”

“No, sweetie. Of course not. Tanner and Colin are qualified teachers, and as long as you enjoy going, you can keep doing so.”

“Will you keep talking to them?”

“I assume so. They’re good, kind people.” It would take some time to move past what happened between us, which was my mistake for letting it mean more—for letting them take up too much space in my heart—but Alana wouldn’t pay the price for that.

Alana gave me a hug, which she hadn’t done at bedtime in years. “Night, Mom.”

“Good night, sweetie.” I wasn’t sure if the conversation was related to what she said to me on Friday night, or if there was more to it. I was just grateful to have my girl happy with me again.

MONDAY MORNING, I was forced to face the reality that I was unemployed. How had I let myself get so distracted that I let those consequences seem smaller in my mind? I needed to file for benefits, find a lawyer, and sift through the referrals friends were sending me.

I brought my laptop into the living room, so I could hang out with the girls while I did all of the online stuff. Normally I didn't mix work and motherhood, but this was a unique instance.

As I was going through email, my phone rang. I frowned at the name *Kandace* on the screen. It would be so easy to ignore this, but responsibility and the desire to tell them off for what they'd done to me, won out. "This is Daria." I kept my tone cool.

"Hi." Kandace sounded... concerned? "Are you feeling all right this morning? How was the time off?"

Was she fucking kidding me? "I've been better. What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping to see you online this morning, so I'm just calling to make sure you're okay." She sounded serious.

And like she was having a different conversation that I was. "Besides the fact that Bernie let me go last week, I'm great."

"He *what*?" Kandace's volume spiked.

Apparently he also hadn't told everyone. "He said I was irresponsible for taking the rest of the week off when you told me to, because I'd been working for him."

“No. Nuh-uh,” Kandace said. “How the fuck have you not served us with papers yet?”

“It’s been a long weekend.”

Kandace sighed. “You don’t have to respect this request, but I’m asking you to please hold off on legal action. I *will* resolve this, and you’ll be back with us soon. If you still want to be.”

“I won’t make any decisions for a day or so, but I am filing for benefits and putting out feelers.”

“That’s fair. I’ll be in touch soon. I promise,” Kandace said. “And I am so sorry.”

Sorry didn’t make the situation better, but I thanked her like the professional I was, and hung up.

A text came through from Carly less than five minutes later. *Kandace just called me. Begged me not to quit. Is that your doing?*

Sort of. I guess, I sent back. Maybe Kandace was serious. Would I really go back to The Raphael Group if they gave me the chance? Not if I had to work for Bernie anymore. Not if I had to put in ridiculous hours and take last minute business trips and surrender a flexible schedule. It might be hard for me to make those demands anywhere, but I’d find someplace that would let me.

A few minutes after that, my phone rang again. My heart flipped and fell flat when I saw Colin’s name on the screen. Now was as good a time as any to start in on the phony *we’re just friends* again act, until I believed it. “Grand Central Station.”

“No, Mommy. This is the Lane Residence.” Harmony didn’t look up from her TV show.

Colin laughed. “I’m sorry, I was looking for Daria Lane. I must have the wrong number.” Despite his teasing tone, something heavy lay underneath.

I knew what that was like. “Hey. What’s up?” As I spoke, I wandered toward the kitchen, and hopefully away from quite so much eavesdropping.

“I have a lawyer’s name for you. It took a little longer than I thought for Brooke to track something down,” he said.

“Thank you. I’m hoping I won’t need it, but send it over.”

“Dropping it in an email now.”

This was the point where I should thank him again, and hang up. But I liked the sound of his voice. I missed it already. I didn’t want to go. “How are you?”

“I’m okay.” His voice said he was anything but.

“Obvious lie is obvious.” I called him on it before I could think about if I wanted to go down that road. “How are you really?”

“You actually want to know?”

“I actually do.” It was true. I cared and I couldn’t shut that off.

Colin’s sigh echoed in my ear. “Well, I’m incapable of casual sex without an emotional attachment, I’ve been lying to myself for years about my relationship with my best friend, and I don’t know what to do next. Sorry you asked?”

My heart was cracking. Again. But, “No. I’m not. So you and Tanner...”

“There’s no *me and Tanner*.” Colin’s laugh was bitter.

“I’m sorry.” I needed those words to encompass so much more than they were capable of.

“It’s okay. I made my own decisions, these are the consequences. I’m a big boy.”

“Yeah you are.” I winced as the teasing slipped out. “I shouldn’t have said that.” Did I need to monitor everything that came out of my mouth now?

“That’s okay, too,” Colin said. “I’ve been holding this inside for so long, it made me resent him. Our relationship means exactly what he said it did. Exactly what you said.”

But did it? His words sliced through me. I desperately wanted to say *I was wrong*, and tell him it meant more. *He* meant more. I looked up to find Alana watching from across the room. “I’m sorry,” I said again.

“Me too. I’ll see Alana at practice?”

I nodded. He couldn’t see me. “You will. Talk to you then.” I hung up before either of us could say something I didn’t know how to deal with.

I spent the rest of the day bouncing between waiting for Kandace to get back to me, looking for new work, and trying not to act like a lovesick teenager by staring at Colin’s email in my inbox

It had a lawyer’s name and said *good luck*. It wasn’t even as though he’d sent me something worth swooning over. Tanner called me, and I let it go to voicemail. He sent a follow-up text that said *talk to me. Please*.

I wanted to. The simple request left an ache in my chest. Instead, I replied with *let me know if it’s an emergency. Otherwise, Alana will see you at practice*.

When my phone buzzed almost immediately after with another text, I wasn't sure if I was happy or irritated with Tanner's persistence. But it was from Kandace, asking me to give her just one more day.

I told her *fine*. Not that my brain would be happy with another day like today. I had to at least start sending resumes out, or I'd go nuts.

Tuesday morning, I woke up to a quiet house. Super quiet. Too quiet. I jolted out of bed with a start, and stalked toward the girls' rooms. Both empty, with their beds made. What the fuck? Whispers drifted up from downstairs and relief trickled in at the familiar voices.

I padded down to the living room to find Alana and Harmony watching *Beauty and the Beast* with the sound off, and eating cereal. Not completely unheard of, but not normal, either.

"Hi, Mom." Alana seemed completely back to herself. "You don't have to worry about breakfast or dishes. I'm taking care of it."

Maybe not quite herself. I'd ask what she wanted or what she was up to, but I didn't want to ruin the mood. I didn't usually allow them to eat breakfast in front of the TV, but they were behaving.

Alana whispered something to her sister, and Harmony set her bowl on the coffee table and ran up to me.

"Mommy, I want to swim like Alana does."

That was new. Harmony liked to play in the water, but she'd never shown any interest in more. I looked past her to Alana, who wasn't watching us, but who was sitting very still, her head half-turned in our direction.

What was she up to?

“Do you want to compete the way Alana does? Or do you just want lessons?”

Harmony glanced over her shoulder then back at me. “Lessons?”

Alana huffed, set her bowl next to Harmony’s, and joined us. “She told me earlier that she wanted Colin to teach her to swim.”

Now I knew what Alana was up to, but still wasn’t sure why. I crouched so I was eye-level with Harmony. “Do you want that, or did your sister tell you to ask for that?”

“I want that.” Harmony nodded. She sounded much more certain this time. Alana was a decent manipulator, but Harmony wasn’t a great liar.

“Okay. We’ll talk to him this afternoon when we take Alana to practice.”

“You could call him now,” Alana said.

Was she looking for assurance that she wouldn’t have to give up swimming? I still didn’t understand. “It’s early. This afternoon will be fine.”

Harmony cheered and Alana scowled.

I needed coffee before I could dig deeper into her motivations, but I was happy she was talking to me again. Fortunately making coffee took minimal brain power, and within a few minutes, the machine was hissing and steaming and the incredible smell of consciousness was drifting my way.

Coffee in hand, I made myself comfortable at the kitchen table. This was life back to normal. Or, it would be once I was

working again. The girls would start school in a few weeks, we'd be back to hectic schedules and meals when we had time.

And making plain, boring, casual-and-completely-friendly-and-nothing-more small talk with my daughter's swim coaches.

When I was done with my first cup of coffee, I worked my way through a semblance of a morning routine on auto-pilot, and settled back in the kitchen. No news from Kandace, not that I expected any overnight. Colin's name still sat in my inbox, teasing me.

It was barely eight when someone rang the front bell.

"I'll get it, so you can keep working," Alana was already on her feet.

Did she know who it was, or was this part of her campaign of helpfulness? "I'll get it." If she'd done something nuts like call Colin or Tanner, what would I say? *Nice to see you, have a nice day?*

I had to.

I opened the door to find Kandace on the other side.

She gave me a warm smile. "I'm sorry to drop by unannounced. I was on my way into the office and I realized I need to have this conversation face to face with you. You deserve that."

"Come on in." I stepped aside, squashing my curiosity under the heavy weight of professionalism and being a good hostess. "Do you want some coffee? Anything else?"

"I'm really trying to cut back on the caffeine, thanks."

"Alana, will you and Harmony go play upstairs for a little while?" I expected a protest with my request.

Instead, Alana grabbed Harmony's hand and led her up to their rooms.

Kandace and I took seats at the table. She let out a short sigh. "I'd love to make small talk, but I think you're anxious to hear what I have to say."

"I am." I hoped it didn't require me to use that lawyer's number from Colin, but we'd see.

She nodded. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you. I had a lot to get through, including some red tape with the other partners, but we pushed things through because of the critical nature of the situation."

It sounded so serious. It was to me, but she had to be talking about more. I didn't dare interrupt.

"We've been having issues with Bernie for a while," Kandace said. "Every one of us was invited to join the firm because we all share some key values that make an organization like this work. It had become clear that he wasn't on the same page as us after all, so we've parted ways with him. You weren't the cause, but your firing was that final straw."

"Oh." That was good news, wasn't it? Not for him, but the asshole fired me, and that wasn't the first run-in I'd had with him.

"Come back to work for us. If you've got other offers, we'll match them."

I stared at Kandace, processing the words, and then the damn in my mind broke. It was a good job. They'd given me a lot of opportunities, I enjoyed the other partners, and working with Carly was awesome.

“I can’t go back to the way things were before.” The words tumbled out, contrary to my thoughts. My mouth knew me better than my mind sometimes. “The long hours, the last-minute business trips... I don’t want it to be five or ten years from now, or even one, and I realize I’ve missed my girls growing up.”

Kandace smiled. “That’s more than reasonable. I’ll put that in your rehire offer, and if you say you’ll come back, you will be paid for last week and any days this week. You’ve got skills that will be hard to replace, and not just at the resume level. You know our business, you know how to work with our people, and we like your approach to work and your drive.”

“Put it all in writing, that I get at least a week’s notice for travel and I’m not on call on weekends, and I’ll come back.”

“Fantastic.” Kandace grabbed her phone and made some notes. We agreed I’d start again tomorrow—she offered to give me the rest of the week, but I’d go stir crazy if I took that long—and that she’d get me an updated rehire offer within a few hours.

I sent Kandace on her way and tried to fall into the fantastic news. I didn’t have to look for a new job, or sue the old one, or do the math about how long my savings would last.

Which meant I could save the lawyer information from Colin for a different rainy day.

As his name passed through my head, the gnawing that had been inside for days was back. The pit that missed them both far more than was reasonable.

It had only been a few days. I’d get over this feeling. There wasn’t another choice, because I had two wonderful lives, two children, who needed at least one parent that cared. Me dating

Colin and Tanner would detract from that. As Alana put it, that would hurt her as well as me when things didn't work out.

And I couldn't walk into any relationship knowing that.

colin

I KNELT NEXT to the motorcycle in Brooke's garage—her much cleaner than a few days ago garage—and examined the primer on the gas tank. The base coat was dry, set, and sanded. It was the perfect canvas.

Last time I said that, it was looking over Daria's gorgeous frame. I missed her terribly.

Paige, my niece, had rebuilt this bike. It had been her dad's before he passed away when she was a kid, and she was determined to give it a good life.

She hadn't quite figured out the right look for it, this would be the third time I'd painted the thing, but I didn't mind. She made the bike purr, and I'd help her make it look good.

Her twin brother, Bryan, was just as brilliant, but in an academic direction. They were seventeen, and in a few weeks would head into their last year of high school.

Brooke would never admit it out loud, but she was already wondering how she was going to cope when they went off to college. Like Daria, she'd given everything to her kids, and doubled down when they lost their father.

The twins were at track and field practice, with Paige cheering on Bryan as he and the team prepped for early school year matches. I'd already cleared the garage, the attic, and taken most of the large trash to the dump. I wanted to tackle the creaky old barn on the back of Brooke's property, but she'd reiterated it was off limits, so I was prepping Paige's bike for painting. Was I doing anything I could to not think about Tanner and Daria? Damn right.

I glanced over my shoulder at the sound of the door from the house to the garage opening. Brooke stepped into the garage, and I gave her a nod and went back to work.

"Who's Daria?" Brooke's soft question tied my insides in knots.

"Where did that come from?"

Brooke shrugged. "Sisterly instinct."

Bullshit. "You already know who she is. She's a mom of one of the kids in our classes."

"And a friend?"

"Of course." *Just a friend.* Tanner's voice taunted me in my head.

"A good enough friend she let the two of you stay at her house, while no one else was going to be there."

I stopped what I was doing and turned to Brooke. "You have a point?"

"Just being noseey."

"Without question." I wanted to get back to work, but there was no way I'd have the focus now. So much for ignoring my problems.

Brooke crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. “It’s just that you’re here moping over Tanner, but you’ve got some lady friend...”

“Daria’s not some throwaway rebound fuck.” I winced as the words passed my lips. That wasn’t what Brooke said.

She looked surprised as well. “Not all of us think in terms of flings and hook-ups.” She almost sounded hurt.

She hadn’t dated much since she lost her husband. And not really before that, either. We were raised in a religious household, and my sisters were all taught their biggest goal in life was to find a man and make him happy.

Brooke took longer to lose her faith than I did, and even though she was older, there were still some things she wasn’t comfortable with. I’d never delved into whether or not one of them was casual sex, but I assumed.

I sighed. “Daria... The thing is... It’s complicated.”

“More complicated than you loving Tanner for years and not telling him?”

“So much more complicated. What’s with the twenty-questions?”

Brooke pushed away from the house and joined me. She settled on an upside-down milk crate we had out here to use as a stool. “I worry about you. I’m not complaining about the fact that you’ve eaten through my *I’ll never do* list, but it does make a woman curious.”

How was I supposed to explain this to her when there were parts of it I couldn’t make sense of myself. “I think I’m falling for both of them.” The words tumbled out unfiltered. “Not in a love triangle kind of way, but in an *I want them both long term* kind of way.”

“Still sounds like a love triangle...”

“No. Because I don’t want to pick.”

She twisted her mouth. “You have to, don’t you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.” God, I hoped not. Though at this point, neither Tanner nor Daria was a choice, so it didn’t matter.

Brooke furrowed her brow. “So, like... polygamy?”

“No. More like marriage, but with three people.” Oh, shit. Did I just say marriage? Nope. The three of us didn’t have that. Nope.

Why couldn’t we have that? After a bit more getting to know each other. But...

“Is that a thing?” Brooke asked.

“Legally? Probably not. Emotionally... Yes.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know how that’s possible, but I can tell you’re miserable, and you’re the reason I understand that someone doesn’t have to pick between liking men and women. Of course, I didn’t think it was so literal.”

I let out a strained laugh. “It’s usually not.”

“Can I meet her?”

“Things aren’t happening that way.” This was reality, no matter how much I wanted otherwise. It didn’t matter if Daria felt the same, even. She had her reasons for putting an end to that side of our relationship. “She’s choosing to focus on her kids.”

“Ah. That I understand. You know, you’ll have to talk to Tanner eventually. Either cut him off altogether, or make things right.”

One of those options made my gut churn and the other didn't seem possible. "I talk to him at practice."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know."

Brooke stood and patted me on the shoulder. "If anyone can figure this out, it's you."

"Thanks." I wished I could agree with her.

I worked on my sketch a little longer, penciling something out for Paige to take a look at when she got home, then headed to swim class. I arrived just as the first students were showing up, so I could give them my attention instead of talking to Tanner.

He gave me a tentative smile and a wave, and I nodded back.

When Alana showed up, Daria and Harmony were with her. Daria's smile was pasted on, but she looked good. Why couldn't she and Tanner and I go talk somewhere and make this work between the three of us?

Would either of them want that, even if me being with them was an option? Sharing for fun was one thing, but I was being delusional even hoping for that kind of long-term attention from one of them.

Daria approached me. "Colin, hey. Harmony wants to start taking swim lessons."

"Sure. We can get her signed up." Would this be us long term? No fun. No banter. Not even a little bit of *how are you today?*

I got Harmony registered for classes, Daria sent the girls off to get changed, and she settled into the bleachers to watch.

This was going to suck.

We kicked off class before Tanner could draw me into another round of *let's talk, but I don't know about what*.

Things ran smoothly. The older kids practiced with Tanner and I worked with the younger ones. The longer the afternoon went on, the rowdier and more impatient the younger kids grew, which was standard, until I decided it was time to call it a day for them. "All right, everyone out of the water."

I was focused on making sure every kid was out, when a series of laughs and shouts caught my attention. Two of the kids were splashing water at each other as I raised myself from the pool. "Come on, guys. Pool safety," I called.

"Can't catch me," Edward shouted, and ran from another of the boys.

Shit. "Hey, no running," I shouted, and moved to chase them. My foot hit the tile at the wrong angle, and I lost my traction. I swore my world slowed to a crawl as my legs slipped from underneath me and the edge of the pool rushed up to meet my face. I couldn't stop myself from—

tanner

THE HAPPY SCREAMS of kids were background noise, since I was working with my own students, but Colin's shout drew my attention. I hated that he was only saying the bare minimum to me. That Daria was the same—

I swore my heart stopped when Colin's footing slipped. He was falling at the wrong angle, toward the edge of the pool, and I was on my feet.

His head struck the edge, and I was sprinting.

He didn't surface again, and I was diving into the water.

When I hit the water, my angle wasn't right either. I felt the familiar, excruciating tear in my shoulder, but that didn't matter. Kicked straight for Colin, who wasn't moving, wrapped my good arm around his waist, and hauled him to the surface.

I was vaguely aware of shouting—Daria—telling one of the older boys to help me, and everyone else to get out of the water. She was barking orders at other parents, at everyone.

The only thing I cared about right now was that Colin hadn't opened his eyes.

I lay him on his side on the ground, and he coughed as his eyelids fluttered. Adrenaline had my heart and body running

on overdrive, but I couldn't do anything except lay him on his side and make sure he kept breathing.

"There's an ambulance on its way. What do you need?" Daria knelt next to me.

To keep him breathing and conscious. Not lying down but not upright. "Something to prop him up."

"Who? What happened?" Colin tried to sit up.

Daria slid a pool toy behind his head, and I gently nudged him back to lay on it.

"You hit your head," I said.

Colin leaned his weight back. "Oh."

"How's your shoulder?" Daria asked.

Right. The agony screaming through half my torso. I'd most likely torn the rotator cuff again. "It'll be fine." I'd never compete again—the Olympics were definitely out—and it didn't matter, as long as Colin was all right.

"You look worried." Was that a slur to Colin's words? "What happened?"

"You hit your head," I repeated.

He frowned. "Oh."

Double fuck. I'd seen this a few times with other athletes. I held a finger in front of Colin's face, about two feet away. "Follow the movement, eyes only."

"It's all blurry." Colin stared at my hand and blinked a few times. "Nope. Still blurry."

So this was probably a concussion.

“You take care of him, I’ll make sure everyone gets home safely and the place locked up,” Daria said.

“Why?” Colin asked. “What happened? Why does my head hurt?”

It was going to be a long night. It didn’t matter, as long as he came through this okay. I gave Daria all of the information she needed, and she returned from our lockers a short while later with phones and clothes. I answered Colin’s questions as many times as he asked them.

When the ambulance arrived, I told them everything that happened and what I’d done so far, while they strapped Colin to a stretcher.

Daria grabbed my arm before I could follow them outside. “Call me as soon as you know more, please?”

“Sure. Of course.” I turned away before I finished the promise, and joined the EMTs and Colin outside. They tried to tell me I needed to meet them at the hospital. Fuck that. “I’m his partner.”

I braced myself for Colin to contradict me, but he didn’t seem to be paying attention.

The EMT shrugged and pointed me to the passenger seat. I’d take it. The trip took the longest fifteen minutes of my entire life. Would Colin be okay? What if his injuries had been worse? What if I’d never gotten the chance to tell him—

I drew in a shaky breath. That wasn’t the case here, but it might have been. I was almost willing to let him walk out of my life because I was too much of a coward to admit I loved him. That I was *in* love with him.

At the hospital, I explained again what happened, and they wheeled Colin away for examination. Filling out paperwork

and giving them his information kept me distracted for a little, but not nearly long enough. They showed me to a small room to wait, while he went through X-Ray, MRI, and whatever else they deemed necessary.

I wanted to call Daria, but I didn't have much of an update for her. I sent her a quick text instead. *At the hospital. No more news.*

When she replied with *thanks for letting me know* I felt the tension in the brief message. As soon as he could remember that I'd said it, I was telling him how I felt. That I was wrong and an idiot for not seeing it sooner.

Fuck it, I'd tell him the moment I could talk to him again, and over and over, until he did remember.

A nurse came into the room to give me an update, and paused, staring at me. "You're favoring your arm."

"I have an old injury—torn rotator cuff—I think I re-damaged it." I wasn't worried about that. The pain stayed at a dull roar if I didn't move my shoulder.

"Come on. Let's get you checked out."

"I can't. I'm waiting."

He raised his eyebrows. "Your partner is going to be a while, but I promise to have someone come find you if he's done before you are."

After an examination and a few tests, they confirmed what I already knew—my arm was shot. They gave me a sling, but my injury wasn't the same kind of emergency as Colin's, so my scans would wait.

And then I was back to doing the same.

It was almost ten at night when Colin's doctor found me. "Colin is fine. He has a concussion, but the damage isn't severe. The short-term memory loss is already mostly gone, but expect to still see it occasionally. We do want to keep him overnight for observation, and when he checks out, someone will need to stay with him for at least 24 hours."

"That'll be me. Where is he?"

"I'll have an orderly bring you to his room, and a nurse will be by in a little bit with information about what to do after he checks out."

"Thank you."

I called Brooke, who went from sounding annoyed to hear from me, to definitely irritated that I hadn't let her know sooner, to relieved that Colin was okay.

"Tanner." The edge in her voice stopped me as we were ending the call.

"Hmm?"

"Don't hurt him, or I will hunt you down."

Because of course Colin had told her why he was staying with her. I doubted he used the words *clueless asshat*, but the meaning probably came across that way. "I promise that's the last thing I want."

I called Daria next, and she picked up immediately. "Hey. How is he?" she asked.

"He's all right." It was such a relief to say that. "Concussion, they're keeping him overnight, but he'll be okay."

"Good. How are you? You hurt yourself?"

“I’m okay too. Thank you, for taking care of everything at the pool.” I’d been aching to talk to her for more than a week, and this was the only conversation that mattered now. I still wanted to tell her I felt like that week at her house was more. That I wanted more from her.

But I understood why she’d stepped back, and Colin was who mattered tonight. And every night. Every day. Why did I have to wait until things were desperate to realize how I felt?

Daria had said something.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that.”

She huffed out a weak laugh. “I asked if you need a ride to your car.”

“No, but thank you. I’m staying here for a while.”

“Okay. Call me if you need anything.” She sounded sincere, and I knew she meant it rather than throwing the words out as a platitude.

“Thank you.”

With the phone calls done, I gathered up our bags, and waited an excruciating 15 more minutes until they finally brought me to Colin.

He was in a regular hospital room, his bed raised enough to have him half sitting. He looked pale, and a frown whispered across his face when he saw me.

Where was I supposed to start? “I’m so—”

“Your arm.”

I— what?

“What happened?” Colin asked.

I stared at him. “You’re lying there with a dented brain and you’re worried about my arm?”

He shrugged.

A hysteria-tinged laugh slipped past my lips. “Are you kidding me right now? I was an absolute ass to you. We’ve barely spoken in days. You could’ve fucking drowned, and you want to know how my arm is?”

“Well, yeah. It’s in a sling. How badly are you hurt?”

“God damn it, Colin. I swear I don’t deserve you.” I stopped next to his bed.

One corner of his mouth tugged up. “You really don’t. Why did you tell them you were my partner?”

He remembered that. Of all the things... “Wishful thinking.”

And now Colin’s frown was back.

I had to make this right. “I’m sorry for being dim. For not recognizing how you felt about me. For not admitting how I feel about you. I don’t know if it’s too late, but I love you Colin. I’m lost without you.”

“I should hit my head more often. The hallucinations are amazing.”

“I just poured my heart out to you.”

“I wouldn’t call it a pour. How’s it feel, by the way? To confess your heart’s desire and not get the response you hoped for?”

I worked my jaw.

Colin grinned. “I love you too. I didn’t stop feeling a lifetime of adoration in the last few days.”

I laughed. “All right. I deserved that.”

“I get a kiss, right? *I love you* comes with kisses?” Colin asked.

It absolutely did. I pressed my lips softly to his, not wanting to hurt him, but I lingered, not wanting to pull away. How was this so perfect? And how did I almost walk away from it?

colin

I WANTED to drag out the teasing a little longer, and make Tanner sweat, but I was also so giddy to hear him say those words. And if I thought the kisses were good before, when we were *just fooling around*—as if—this tender, concerned Tanner and the way his lips moved against mine, lit my soul on fire.

“Come back home when they discharge you?” Tanner murmured against my mouth.

I smiled and kissed him again. “Okay. But only because you’re pretty when you’re worried about me.”

“I’m pretty all the time,” Tanner said.

I wanted to keep kissing, and maybe more, but the increasingly insistent beeps from my blood pressure monitor said that might not be a good idea.

Tanner pulled back, looking as reluctant as I felt, seconds before a nurse walked into the room.

She looked between the two of us, then took a look at the machine. “This is going to set off an alarm every time one of your numbers goes out of whack.” The warning in her voice was clear.

Heat flooded my cheeks. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She left us alone, and Tanner settled on the edge of the bed instead. “I guess the hand job has to wait until they release you,” he teased.

I grinned. “Probably a good idea. Both parts of it.” The monitor beeped loudly again, and I forced myself to calm down.

Tanner’s laugh didn’t help. But it did sound wonderful. I’d missed him.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong with your arm?” I asked.

He looked down at the sling and a frown whispered across his face before vanishing again. “I tore my rotator cuff.”

“What?” My gut sank. “How?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Pulling me out of the pool. Oh, fuck. The Olympic trial.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I’d make the same choice every single time if I had to.”

“But you pushed so hard. You—”

Tanner rested his palm on my cheek. “It doesn’t matter. You being safe matters.” His sincerity was heavy.

“I still feel bad.”

“Because you’re you.” Tanner smiled. “Another thing I love you for—you care about people. It’s never just lip service.”

Another thing I love you for. Hearing that wasn’t getting old anytime soon. Or ever.

“I’m going to say this, not because it makes a difference in how I feel about the situation, but in case it helps you,” Tanner

said. “I barely squeaked out that qualifying time. What was I going to do? Spend money we’ve been saving for years to fly to tryouts? I wasn’t coming home with the gold—or the bronze—no matter how much I wanted to believe otherwise.”

“You might have.” If anyone could do it, Tanner could. He made so many things happen that I was pretty sure were by pure force of will.

“It doesn’t matter. You being all right matters. I’ll say that as many times as I have to for you to know I mean it.” He kissed my fingertips. “Get some rest, so I can take you home.”

That wasn’t happening. Not with Tanner’s *I love yous* floating in my thoughts and heart. Instead, we caught up. He told me about the building estimate, which was incredible news, and a far more interesting story than mine about cleaning out Brooke’s garage.

“That is, if you still want to work with me,” Tanner said.

I looked at him with disbelief. “Partner in every sense of the word. You can’t shuffle me off just because I hurt my brain. Of course I still want to do this.” We’d have to figure out the logistics of the fact that neither of us would be teaching swimming for a little while, and get bank approval if we wanted the building, but now seemed like as good a time as any to start expanding our operations.

We talked a little longer, but sleep stole in without my permission. I woke up to sunlight striking my window, and Tanner nowhere to be found. I grabbed the nurse, asked about discharge, and if she’d seen where he went.

She told me she’d find the doctor for the first, but that Tanner wasn’t here when she clocked in half an hour ago.

My heart sank. I shouldn't have expected him to spend the night here, that was ridiculous. But his being gone was enough to make me wonder if I remembered last night right.

The doctor stopped by to do one more check-up, gave me the final information I needed to check out, and told me I could be on my way as soon as I had a ride. I should probably call Tanner or Brooke.

I was mostly dressed, pulling on my socks, when someone knocked. "You decent?" Tanner called.

His voice made my heart flutter, in spite of my doubt. "Yup."

He walked in with Brooke, who smiled when she saw me, and gave me a tight hug. "So glad you're all right. This dummy didn't tell me you were even hurt until nearly ten last night."

Tanner shrugged. "I was too busy worrying about you, Colin. Speaking of, sorry I wasn't here when you woke up. I called her to take me to my car, and explain what happened. I thought we'd be back before you were ready to go."

"Last night happened, right? All of it?" I needed to know that now, and I didn't care who heard.

Tanner crossed the room, cradled my face with his good hand, and brushed his lips over mine, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Brooke gasped.

"If you mean the pink elephants, no. Those weren't real." Tanner kissed me again. "But this is. The part where I told you I love you is very, very, real."

"It's about freaking time," Brooke said.

I laughed in spite of myself, and kissed Tanner back. It felt right to clench his shirt in my fists and press my body to his, and with no alarms to say my blood pressure was too high, I could keep tasting him. Feeling him. All of it.

My cock twitched and hardened, and I let go. I wasn't comfortable doing *all* of this in front of my sister.

"I'll go move your stuff from my car to Tanner's," Brooke said. "Keys."

Tanner fished his keys out, never pulling away from me, and handed them over.

As soon as she was gone, he and I broke out in embarrassed laughter. This was so right.

A nagging in the back of my mind said something was missing. Someone. I could think about Daria later—for now, I was going to enjoy finally having Tanner.

daria

WAITING for news from Tanner was agonizing. I didn't care that it was late when he finally called, it only mattered that he and Colin were both all right.

They were friends, of course I was worried. If something happened to Carly, I'd be worried too.

This felt different though. Because I was making my worry for Tanner and Colin more, or because it actually was more? And did my feelings matter any more than they had this morning, if seeing the men was bad for my girls?

Nope.

My sleep was restless and my mind filled with questions about what I wanted versus what I should be doing.

In the morning, I dragged myself through coffee. Kandace's rehire offer was exactly what she promised, and I was going back to work today. I needed something to occupy my mind.

Harmony wanted cereal for breakfast, and Alana said she'd do the same. That made things easy. Alana even filled both their bowls again—the help was nice, but what was she up to?

“Mommy, can I play the games on the back of the box?” Harmony asked.

At least that was normal. “Eat your food first.”

“Okay.” She shoveled a spoonful into her mouth.
“Artnclmfph mpbuledy?”

I sighed internally, but I was also grateful to see my little one acting like herself. “Swallow before you talk.” I told Harmony.

She did as requested. “Are Colin and Tanner going to be our new daddies?”

I choked on my coffee. This was why I never brought men into the house. But they were different. And the girls had liked them before I ever slept with Colin and Tanner.

Fuck. This was messy. “Daddy is your daddy.” Nonsensical-but-obvious mom statement for the win.

“But Edward has two daddies and two mommies.” Harmony ate more of her food.

Alana was strangely quiet for all of this. Where was the *you’re so stupid, followed by I’m not stupid, you’re stupid?*

“Edward’s parents divorced then married other people,” I said.

Harmony nodded. “And you and Daddy are divorced.”

Alana huffed.

There it was.

She sank in her seat and crossed her arms.

Or not.

“When I grow up, I’m going to marry Edward and Joanie.” Harmony moved on to the next tangent.

Thankfully, this was a conversation I could handle. Well, maybe not, but it was preferable to the previous one. “You can’t marry people unless everyone agrees.”

“I already asked them,” Harmony said. “They said okay.”

Because of course my forward-looking child was already planning her wedding. “You’ll have to make sure again when we get closer to you being older.”

“When will that be?” Harmony asked.

“Ten years.” That felt like a safe answer.

Harmony nodded and returned to her cereal.

Thank fuck she’d moved on from the Tanner and Colin question. I’d love it if I could do the same.

The thought gnawed at me. How long until I *could* move on? Because as much as I knew I should, I didn’t want to.

Alana finished her breakfast first, walked her bowl to the sink, and rinsed it out before returning to the table. “Mom, it’s okay if they are.”

I could ask what she was talking about, but the pit in my gut had a pretty good idea. Harmony hadn’t asked about Colin and Tanner on her own—she’d had prompting from her older sister.

“They’re really nice,” Alana said. “And I bet they’d never cancel a vacation early or make you change your plans last minute, and they’re old like you.”

Should I be grateful I was just *old* and not *old and gross* like Uncle Dustin? “Colin and Tanner aren’t old.”

Alana shrugged.

I expected a lot of things out of motherhood, but nothing anywhere had prepared me for this conversation. Part of me had thought I could avoid even introducing one man into their life until they were older, but two? “I’m not getting remarried. Not to them or anything.”

There was that nagging pain in my chest again. That murmur of *but I don’t want to lose them*.

“Okay.” Alana took Harmony’s bowl when it was empty, and cleaned those dishes up too, before returning to her chair at the table.

She never dropped a subject unless she thought she was being clever and had a plan. What was she up to?

Harmony pulled the cereal box closer. As she followed the maze on the back with her finger, she told a story about the pony who lived in the forest at the end. This was a continuation of the same story she’d told last week, while she connected the dots on another picture.

“Mom, can I have an end of summer party?” Alana asked.

Was this what she’d been leading up to? It’d be a lot of work, but I could enlist help, and it was so much better than talking about how much Tanner and Colin would be in our futures. “Sure.”

“Boys and girls?”

I wasn’t ready to deal with that. “Some of the parents won’t like that, and it will mean fewer people will come.”

“Okay. Just girls then.”

That was too easy.

“Can it be a pool party?”

Part of my mind was putting together the pieces of Alana's plan, but I couldn't grasp the final goal. "We don't have a pool." I shouldn't have to remind her of that, but my brain was working overtime to guess her next question. "And the rec center isn't good for parties."

"Uncle Dustin has a pool."

Harmony had stopped telling her story and was watching us.

"No. Phillip has a pool." I knew that Dustin and Adrienne spent a lot of time there, but they didn't live at Phillip's. Yet.

Alana looked at me with what she probably assumed were big puppy dog eyes. "Please? I promise not to fight with Harmony for an entire month."

Like that was going to happen. "That should be your goal anyway."

"Pleeeeeeasssse?"

"Please. Please. Please. Please." Harmony joined in.

There were far worse things Alana could ask for, and I still had some of that mom guilt going on. "I'll call Phillip, but if he says *no*, that's that."

"Now?" Alana asked.

"He's working now."

My response earned me another chorus of *pleases*.

I settled for sending him a text instead. If he took a while to reply, I could set the girls up for the morning and start work.

He answered within a few minutes. *Of course. Any weekend, just give me a few days' notice.*

Easy enough. *Thank you.* I replied. *Tell Dustin and Adrienne hi.*

I looked up from my phone to find Alana watching me.

“He says yes, just pick a date.”

Alana clapped. “I want it this Saturday. Can I have a new swimsuit? Never mind, it’s okay. I’m good with the suit I have. I’m going to go make a list of who to invite.” She pushed back from the table and made it up two stairs before she stopped and turned to me again. “Can Tanner and Colin come?”

My heart twisted in on itself. On the one hand, it made sense she’d want her swim coaches at her pool party. On the other hand, my daughter had more convoluted schemes than a daytime soap opera. “I don’t know if either of them will be up for swimming by then, and you said girls only.”

“But they’re your friends not mine. Besides, it never hurts to have more adults watching over things. *Please.*”

“Stop.” I didn’t need another round of Harmony joining in on the begging. “Sit down at the table, Alana.” I looked at Harmony. “Hon, would you like to go tell the pony’s story to Dumbo?”

Harmony shook her head. “Alana said I could listen when you talked about our new daddies.”

Ah, hell. “What are you up to, Alana?” I could assume, but that could be dangerous when it came to her scheming.

“I want a pool party.”

I stared at her, hoping she’d fess up without too much prodding. I wasn’t up for dragging the truth out of her.

Alana ducked her head. “You’ve been really sad since they went home. Like *really* sad. And you looked even sadder when you saw them yesterday, and I don’t want you to be sad.”

“It’s been a long few days.”

“But I’ve never seen you so sad. Even when Dad left you weren’t sad. You just didn’t yell as much anymore.”

Guilt, thy name is Mother. I mentally scrubbed my face and tried to find an answer.

“If you want to marry them, that’s okay with us,” Alana said.

Damn it. Fuck. God fucking damn it. “I don’t have a *let’s get married* kind of relationship with Tanner and Colin.”

“Yet.” Alana’s reply echoed the thought I didn’t dare indulge. “But how will you know if you could, if you stop talking to them?”

Could someone please stop my children from growing up so quickly? “What happened to *when people break up, other people get hurt?*”

Alana frowned. “But you’re already hurt.”

“All right.” That wasn’t what I should say, but my mouth refused to grasp any other words. “I’ll invite them to your party, but don’t be surprised if they can’t make it.”

“*Yay.*” Alana and Harmony cheered and clapped in unison.

What was I doing?

I didn’t know anymore.

tanner

WHEN COLIN and I got home from the hospital, I tugged him into my room. “I’m supposed to keep an eye on you for at least twenty-four hours. Doctor’s orders.”

“We don’t want to go against the doctor.” Colin’s smile was warm. Genuine. Reassuring.

“My point exactly.” I pulled him into bed and pressed myself into his back. This felt natural—how did I miss that before? How did I deny it for so long?

He snuggled closer. “You have no idea how many times I dreamed of something like this.”

It was still strange hearing that he’d seen me as more than a friend for so long, but unlike before, my hesitation was gone. I needed to make the most of it. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it. In you and in me.”

“Did Tanner Hagen just apologize for something?” Colin looked over his shoulder, teasing in his voice.

I laughed. “Don’t get used to it.”

“Oh, I plan to.”

I didn’t mean to fall asleep, but the tension and uncertainty that had haunted me for days was lifting, and laying here with

Colin felt *so* right.

I woke up to him stirring. The clock said it was nearly noon. I reluctantly extracted myself from the bed, a to-do list ticking off in my head. Still, I had to stop and look at Colin, half awake and looking every bit like my future.

“What?” Colin asked.

I shook my head. “Just basking in the moment.”

“Fuck. Give a guy a little love and all the sudden you turn all sappy on me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you complaining?”

Colin grinned. “Not even for a second. Are you worried enough to give me a sponge bath?”

“I will make sure you don’t get dizzy in the shower.” I rolled to straddle his waist, propping myself up on one elbow and searching his face. How did it take me so long to admit I wanted this? Wanted him? How did I almost throw this away?

He tilted his head up to brush his lips over mine, then flopped back, hesitation flitting in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Just making sure this is real.”

Because for me it was new, and for him it was years of waiting, finally realized. “It is. I promise.”

Colin used his full body to push me back, the heat of his chest against mine searing me. His smile was easy and familiar, but I was seeing it differently now. “Good.” He kissed me again. “Though I’m not sure I trust you to catch me if I fall, with that bum arm.”

“Asshole. Don’t fall, then.”

“Setting aside the fact that completely contradicts the *getting dizzy* sentiment... Too late.” He hopped to his feet. “Shower?”

The tiny stall in his bathroom wasn’t made for two people. The tub in mine was barely better, but standing up, we made it work. Except, standing naked as I faced Colin, hot water streaming over us, hesitation and uncertainty seized me in a way I wasn’t familiar with.

Not that I wanted to leave. But I didn’t know what to do next, with another guy’s dick, hard and pressing into my bare hip.

Colin reached past me, pressing flesh to flesh, and grabbed the body wash. “It’s a shower. There’s no pressure.”

He squirted soap into my hand, and then his own, before setting the bottle down again. It didn’t matter that he focused on not erogenous regions—my chest, my arms—the way he glided slick palms over my skin was incredible.

I returned the favor as best I could with one arm, memorizing the terrain of his body. I’d seen him almost every day since we were teenagers, frequently with both of us wearing next to nothing, and in even less in the showers at the pool. This was different. Electrifying. I wanted to imprint it in my mind forever.

This specific experience was new, but I had a good idea what I’d want if I were in Colin’s place. What I wanted now. I dropped my hand to Colin’s cock, and the sound that rumbled from his chest rolled over and through me when I started to stroke.

The angle wasn’t the same as if I were doing this for myself, but I’d been jerking off for a long time and it was easy

to see if Colin liked what I did.

When he returned the favor, I let out a long groan, and jerked against his tight, slippery grip. He tugged me closer and crushed his mouth to mine. We matched each other stroke for stroke.

Desire and pleasure mounted inside me, wrapping me in the sensations. My need surged toward a bursting point, and my balls tightened. I squeezed Colin harder. Pumped faster. I was barely aware of where his grunts—his body—ended and mine began.

Everything about this was new and amazing, despite the gestures being familiar. This wasn't just physical, there was an emotional connection that ran between us and tied us together. That intensified every sensation and sound and the taste of Colin's kisses and the way he looked with his eyelids fluttering. Hell, even the faint scent of chlorine mixed with soap, as both rinsed down the drain, was arousing.

Colin jerked against my touch with shudders that matched mine. Orgasm flooded me, and his touch eased up as mine did. I rested my head against his shoulder, and he leaned his weight into my good arm, as we both panted to catch our breath. Water spilled around us, rinsing away the results of our mutual masturbation. I tilted against the wall, letting the cool tile soothe my heated skin.

“God, I love you.” Colin's murmur blended with the sound of the shower.

It'd be easy to joke that a good orgasm made a lot of people say that, but I didn't want to lose this moment. I didn't want to play down the warmth bursting in my heart. “I love you too.”

I'd had plenty of practice doing things one-handed the first time I tore my rotator cuff, but there was no way I was going to stop Colin from helping me wash my hair, or rinse me clean, or dry me off.

We both got dressed, and wandered into the kitchen for lunch. We'd done this so many times in the past, but today, it was brand new.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Colin shrugged. "Grilled cheese?"

My heart stalled and my step faltered and images of Daria flashed in my mind.

"Are you okay?" Colin asked.

My love life wasn't quite as neatly tied up as I wanted, and I didn't know how to explain the hesitation to Colin. How was I supposed to tell her *I mean it when I say I love you, but there's someone else, too.*

"You miss her," Colin said. "I do too."

There should be a shock of jealousy. Instead, I was relieved to hear he felt the same way. "Yeah." I sighed and tucked the thought away. I didn't want to, but other things needed to happen first. "Grilled cheese it is."

I made food. As we ate, we discussed what came next for the school. We usually slowed classes down significantly during the fall and winter months, and we'd already had a plan to stop teaching completely if I qualified for the Olympics.

The reminder sent a spike of pain through my shoulder, and I shrugged it off with little thought. This was better. I knew this was better. A glance at Colin, and I had no doubt.

We grabbed our phones, to start making phone calls and class cancellations. When I unlocked mine, several missed calls stared back. “Oops.”

“Who?” Colin asked.

“John. A bank contact Daria referred me to.” I swallowed. “Daria.”

“Call her back.” Colin’s insistence matched the voice in my head.

I was already dialing on speaker phone so Colin could hear.

“Hey.” Daria’s greeting was a combination of hesitant and hopeful.

Or I wanted it to be. I was pretty sure it was. “Hey. I saw you called.”

“Hello,” Colin chimed in.

Daria laughed lightly. “How are you both feeling?”

“Like a million, bazillion bucks.” Colin answered.

I shook my head. “Not quite, but close.”

“Good. I was worried...” The way she trailed off, I expected more. But then several seconds passed.

Was she waiting on one of us? I opened my mouth,

“Alana is having a pool party,” Daria said suddenly. “Her not-quite-uncle has a pool and she’s inviting her friends and she wants her swim coaches there.”

I was surprised, after the fuss Alana put up when she almost walked in on us. Then again, yesterday she was back to her normal, competitive self.

“Neither one of us will be swimming for a while.” Colin zoomed in on the obvious.

“I told her that. She said you could sit at the side of the pool with me.”

“*She* said that?” I was a teensy bit disappointed that hadn’t been Daria’s suggestion, but she’d passed the word along, so that was a start.

Daria’s huff was light. “I say that too. I’d like to see you both again.”

I exchanged looks with Colin and saw my hope reflected back at me. He gave a slight nod.

“We’ll be there,” I said.

“Good. We’ll see you then.” Daria gave us the party details then hung up.

I had other calls to return, but I didn’t think this conversation could wait.

“How I feel about her doesn’t make me love you any less.” Colin blurted out before I could figure out how to start the conversation.

“How do you feel about her?” I could use his answer to decipher my own thoughts. But I already know. “Because I’m falling for her—have fallen?—one is only a few steps from the other. But I love you so much.”

Colin’s smile was now one of my favorite sights. “So maybe we tell her this, instead of holding onto it for years and hoping it becomes something.”

“How many years?” I shouldn’t ask, but I needed to know how long I’d been an idiot for.

“Fifteen. Fifteen million. Does it matter now that you and I have moved to the next step?”

“When did you get so wise?”

Colin grinned. “I’ve always been wise, you’re just too dense to see it.”

I threw a wadded-up napkin at him. “Truth hurts, man. But I hear Daria’s brother has both a boyfriend and a girlfriend. That means some people know how to make it work.”

“What if we’re not two of them?” Colin’s hesitation seemed to come out of nowhere.

I shrugged. “Would you rather let the thought gnaw at you and never know one way or the other?”

He shook his head. “No. Definitely not. As long as I’m not giving you up to have her, then let’s see what happens next.”

“You’re not.” I stood and leaned in to kiss him. A gesture that already felt natural, but also new and incredible. “You and me together no matter what. And with any luck, Daria and her kids are a part of that too.”

colin

THE CALL TANNER received from John was a plea for us to not sue him for the accident. Neither injury happened due to his negligence or the building's disrepair, but Tanner did ask him to help make sure his insurance processed our claims.

The call from Daria's contact at the bank wanted to set an appointment. Tanner and I met with him the next day, and while the conversation seemed to go well, his answer was *I'll be in touch*.

The rest of the week was an odd blur of acquainting myself with Tanner in all new ways, and not knowing what to do with ourselves, thanks to the unplanned vacation. Aside from the occasional headache, I was good within a day or so, but working around his injuries was fun.

I was happy to ride him, blow him, and tease him with two working hands, and he was sexy-sweet trying to figure out how to reciprocate with only one.

This was what I'd wanted just a few weeks ago, and now that I had it, it was so much better than I'd imagined.

Saturday afternoon we headed to the address Daria had given us. A layer of anticipation and excitement hummed under my skin at the thought of seeing her again. I'd had a

hard enough time with one crush, and now I was fully immersed in two of them.

No, that wasn't fair. *Crush* made me think of simple lust. What I felt for both of them was so much more than lust.

We reached the house and parked on the street with a handful of other cars, most of which I recognized from the pool. The man who answered the door looked a lot like Daria. We both knew Dustin, so we exchanged greetings, and he pointed us toward the back of the house.

We were halfway across the main floor when Alana intercepted us. "I'm glad you made it. We need to talk." Her tone was formal and polite. Not a surprise, since she addressed the adults around her like this most of the time.

Was it good or bad that we were currently *adults* and not *friends*? "About what?" I asked.

She looked at Dustin with a scowl. "Go outside."

"Excuse me?" He stared back.

Alana's stern demeanor faltered. "Please? It's private."

Dustin sighed. "All right." He gave us one more glance, then stepped through the sliding glass doors that cut us off from the shouting and laughter on the other side.

"How are you both feeling?" Polite and formal Alana was back. "How's your head?"

"I have the occasional headache, but I'm fine." I'd love to know what she was up to.

"And Tanner, how's your arm?"

He flexed his fingers, but didn't move the shoulder itself. "It'll heal. They don't think I need surgery as long as I'm

gentle with it.”

“How are you?” I asked Alana. She was obviously in control of this conversation.

She frowned. “I’m concerned.”

What?

“How can we help?” Tanner’s somber tone matched hers.

“I’m glad you asked. You can take my mom out on a date, so she stops being sad.”

Tanner coughed.

I didn’t know why he was the least bit surprised to hear Alana be so direct. “We can ask. She has to say *yes*, though.”

“She will. I already told her to.” Alana sounded confident.

This conversation was both surreal and buoying, and a very large part of me wanted to be enough a part of Daria’s life—of her girls’ lives—that conversations like this were the norm.

Alana held up a finger. “But keep in mind, if you make my mom sadder, I’ll find a different team to swim for, and you’ll not only have to replace me, but find someone who thinks they can beat me, and good luck with that.”

No wonder she loved having Tanner as a coach.

I half crouched, so I was at her eye-level. “I promise you, the last thing I want—that either of us wants—is to make Daria sad.”

“In fact, you and Harmony should join us sometimes when we take her out, to make sure,” Tanner added.

Alana seemed to consider this. “You can’t bribe us with presents.”

“We wouldn’t dream of it,” I said.

“But that shouldn’t stop you from trying.” Her words tumbled out quickly.

This wasn’t a conversation I expected to have today, but I was glad we had. I extended my hand. “It’s a deal. We agree to all of your terms.”

“Good.” She shook my hand and then Tanner’s. “My mom is outside, and she’s lonely because she’s not swimming. You should do something about that.”

I had no arguments.

When we stepped outside, it was as if we were minor celebrities. The friends Alana had invited were almost all students, and everyone wanted to make sure we were all right.

The concern was nice, but I wanted to break away and go talk to the woman standing back from all of it, watching us with amusement playing on her face. She was wearing a one-piece suit and a cover-up that did nothing to hide her gorgeous curves.

“Why isn’t anyone swimming?” Dustin called. “I thought this was a pool party.”

Daria’s smile grew.

Sometimes older siblings were an utter embarrassment, but sometimes they were just the best. The latter was especially true in adulthood.

The group disbursed, and Tanner and I headed toward Daria.

“Hey,” she greeted us softly.

All this build-up, and I had no idea what to do next. “Hey.”

“I’m glad you made it,” she said.

“Like we were going to miss the fun?” Even Tanner sounded a little hesitant. He sighed loudly. “I can’t do this. Can we talk about the elephant in the room, and move on?”

I laughed. “And this is one of the reasons I love you.” The words slipped out without thought, thanks to the last few days of being immersed in each other.

Daria’s eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped. “Did you just — Are you two — Fuck me, it’s about time.”

“Did everyone know but me?” Tanner asked.

Daria nodded. “Yes.”

I squeezed his hand. “But you’re pretty even when you’re being clueless.”

“Thanks.” Tanner stuck his tongue out at me.

“*But*”—I looked at Daria—“even though he and I are together, there’s room for one more. Or three more. I don’t want you to ignore your kids for us. I’d rather we were a part of your lives, and not the other way around. How do I say that and have it still be inclusive, but also not creepy?”

Daria’s smile grew. “I think you just did.”

“God, I want to kiss you.” So, so badly. “But it seems like we have more talking to do before...”

“We make this public.” Tanner picked up the thought without hesitation.

“Yes. To both.” Daria gestured to the edge of the pool. “Sit with me instead, and we’ll do the talking and probably the kissing too, when things are quieter?”

Could we send everyone home now? Probably not, but it was tempting. “I have a better idea. I’ll teach you how to swim.”

“No. I don’t... No.” Daria shook her head.

“He’s a really good teacher,” Tanner said.

She met my gaze. “All right. Go change.” She jerked a thumb toward the pool house. “Then swimming.”

She didn’t have to tell me twice.

daria

ANY ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP with Colin and Tanner would be more complicated than Alana saying *Mom, you can date them*, and them saying *we want to be a part of your lives*.

More talking had to happen. More making sure the men understood what that meant to me. Making sure I did.

Despite all of that, I finally felt like it was okay to consider the possibility. To look at a future and imagine them being a part of it. To admit I'd fallen for both Tanner and Colin, and I was tired of relegating visits to dropping my kids off for their classes.

Colin hopped into the shallow end of the pool and gestured for me to join him. The water was only up to my chest, so drowning wasn't a concern. I waded toward him.

Growing up, Dustin was a competition swimmer in school. Nothing like Tanner, but similar to what Alana was currently doing. I'd rebelled against swimming. If my big brother was doing it, I didn't want anything to do with it.

And then it was never a thing anymore. Not a lot of people ask an adult woman *can you swim?* So learning never came up.

Colin took my hands in his, and a shock of want spilled through me. I swallowed the response... mostly.

He searched my face. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." The answer came more easily than I expected. He probably meant just the lesson, but I trusted him with a lot more, and that was both terrifying and wonderful.

He pulled me closer, turned my side toward him, and settled a hand on the middle of my back. "I won't let you fall in the water. I won't let anything happen to you. Your body will want to tense up, and that's okay, but think through it and make yourself relax."

"Okay." I breathed through my nose. My pulse raced as much from his touch as anything.

Colin pressed his hand closer to my skin. "Lift one leg up. Kick it forward straight."

I did what he said, and an uneasy not-quite weightlessness lapped at my skin.

"Now remember, I've got you," Colin said. "Lift the other leg and lay back at the same time."

I tried to do what he said, but my gut lurched and panic surged inside when I lost all contact with the bottom of the pool. I tried to calm myself, like he'd said, but I wanted to feel the ground under my feet again.

"You're doing good." Colin moved his other arm under my legs, keeping me from returning to an upright position. "I've got you. Straighten your body and breathe."

I forced myself to keep breathing through my nose, despite the water lapping at my ears and back, and the urge to hold my breath until I was standing again.

“Relax.” His voice was calm and soothing. “I’ve got you.”

Now I understood why the younger kids liked learning from him. I forced myself to trust his hands, his experience, and I pushed the tension from my body.

“You’re doing it.” He sounded pleased. “You’re floating.”

“You’re holding me up.”

“And I’m going to take the training wheels off, okay?”

I didn’t dare shake my head. “Nope. Not okay.”

“I’m right here. You’ve got this.” He moved both his hands next to each other, near the small of my back.

I could do this. I was a grown woman for fuck’s sake—I could float at the shallow end of a private swimming pool. “I’ve got this.”

Colin moved one hand to mine, and squeezed. Then he moved his other hand away.

Panic flashed inside, and I thought through it. The water didn’t rush in to claim my soul, it rocked my body instead, holding me upright as if I were weightless. A laugh slipped from my throat. “I’m floating.”

“*Cannon ball.*” The shout from the other end of the pool carried above the laughter and shouts, and my entire world rolled and churned as water splashed me in the face.

My limbs flailed and I inhaled as much water as air.

“I’ve got you.” Colin was there, righting me and making sure my feet found the ground. Keeping his hands on my waist while I hacked up a lung full of water.

How super fucking attractive of me. Not. When I could finally breathe again, I forced out a tight laugh. “I think I’m

done with swimming lessons for today.”

“We’ll do them privately next time.”

I looked up to find Colin watching me with adoration, rather than the disgust my undoubtedly red, splotchy face deserved. He really was a keeper.

“I’m not sure I can afford private lessons,” I teased, wanting to move on from the embarrassing moment.

He dipped his mouth near my ear, his breath caressing my skin. “I’m sure we can work something out.”

There was no way this exchange was escaping all attention, and I was pretty sure I didn’t mind. “I’m open to negotiation.” But for today, I was happy to wrap up in a towel and join Tanner at the edge of the pool again. Colin sat on his other side, and the three of us watched and chatted for the next couple of hours.

The afternoon crept toward evening, and we pulled everyone out of the pool and wrapped up the party. After everyone else had dressed enough to leave, Colin and Tanner vanished to do the same.

As the last girl was talking to Alana and waiting for her mom to pick her up, I chatted with Adrienne.

Phillip joined us near the patio doors. “You could leave the girls here for the night, if you wanted.”

His implication was clear. *Ditch the girls, and go have hot sweaty sex with the cute boys.* Something I swore I’d never do. “I can’t.”

“It’s okay,” Adrienne said.

Dustin seemed to appear out of nowhere. “We’ll stretch out the party. Watch movies. Color.”

“I need new art for my wall. Harmony can help.” Adrienne was too sweet.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so, but thank you.”

“Mom.” Alana’s soft voice came from behind, startling me.

Where was her sister? I cast a gaze around the patio to find Harmony talking to Colin and Tanner. She was telling them some sort of story that required a lot of hand gestures, and they were listening intently.

A fist clenched around my heart.

“It’s not like you’re abandoning us,” Alana said. “Besides, Phillip has Twinkies in the cupboard.”

An infatuation I didn’t understand. “You’d ditch me for Twinkies?” I tried to keep my tone light.

“Nope.” Alana popped on the *p*. “I won’t even let you bribe me with Twinkies. But it really is okay. I promise if this day ever comes up in therapy, I’ll only say good things.”

I stared at her, and she grinned. “Teasing,” she said. She was definitely growing up too fast.

“All right. Go get Harmony and tell her you’re having a sleepover at Phillip’s house.” It wasn’t easy to say, but it didn’t make me feel as guilty as I dreaded.

As Alana tugged Harmony toward the house, I approached Tanner and Colin. Their warm smiles made my insides flutter. “We still need to have a conversation,” I said. “Meet me back at my place?”

They both agreed.

The drive home was a torturous mental assault of me figuring out what I needed to say, and discarding every idea that popped into my head. At the house, it was strange having them here again, but even stranger that they'd knocked rather than let themselves in. But it felt right to see them in my entryway.

As the door closed us off from the outside world, Tanner gripped the back of my neck with his good hand, and crushed his mouth to mine. Heat seared through me, and I pressed back, needing to lose myself in his touch. I'd missed this—missed him—so much more than I'd been willing to admit.

Colin rested a hand on my cheek and stole me away. Stealing a kiss. Stealing my breath.

I could lose myself in this—in them—over and over. Which was why I needed to put a pause on things. Just for a moment.

I stepped out of their reach. “Talking first.”

Who knew seeing grown men pout could be so adorable?

We moved to the living room. I waited for them to sit, and took a spot so I could face both of them, close enough for the setting to feel intimate, without being close enough to give into temptation and touch them.

Tanner opened his mouth.

“Me first.” I had to get this out now. “That week together, here... *wow*.” I was hot just thinking about it. “But if we keep seeing each other, that won't be the norm.”

Colin started to say something, and I held up a finger. He snapped his jaw shut.

“What we had before that—the friendship—I don’t let a lot of people into my life like that. The girls’ lives.” I still had no idea how to phrase this, so I was going to let the words pour out and hope they conveyed the right message. “I wouldn’t have offered to let you stay here if I didn’t like you. If I didn’t trust you. This is the home I built for my daughters and I always want them to feel secure here.”

Was that it? I could say more, but it would be repetition. If Colin and Tanner understood what I’d said, we could talk about the rest. I looked between the two of them. “I don’t want to ignore what I feel for each of you, but I’m not labeled for individual sale. Alana and Harmony are my heart, and there’s room in there for other kinds of love, but not without them. It’s easy for someone to say they get that, but I need to know you mean it.”

Tanner nodded. “I do. We do.”

“But it makes sense that you’d want more than just our words,” Colin said. “That you want to see it for yourself.”

I could’ve guessed this is about how they’d respond, but I heard their sincerity, and that meant a lot. “I do want to see this whole thing in action, all of us spending time together.” And now the terrifying part. “I love you both. Individually and together. If you shove my girls aside, it won’t matter how I feel about you, you’ll be gone. But I also wouldn’t be talking to you if I couldn’t believe the things you say.”

Tanner gave a short laugh. “There’s so much of you in them. They’re very much their mother’s daughters.”

“Oh?” I liked the observation, but I needed to know where it came from.

“Alana told us if we made you sad, she wouldn’t swim for us anymore,” Tanner said.

“I think we have her seal of approval,” Colin added.

It sounded like it, and that warmed and reassured me. “She thinks the world of you, which makes this both an easier and a harder decision.”

Tanner scooted closer and lifted my chin to hold my gaze. “I promise you, this is what I want. I want to be a part of your entire life, including your kids’.”

“And I promise I’m happy to prove it.” Colin moved to my other side and rested a hand on my leg. “I adore your children. I love you, and I couldn’t stop myself from loving you, even if I tried. Trust me, I tried.”

“I love you too,” Tanner said. “You’ve got this amazing mind, and you’re an incredible woman. Fucking stunning. Clothed. Unclothed.” Mischief danced in his eyes.

“*Dude.*” Colin’s retort was teasing. “That was almost poetic until the end.”

Tanner scoffed. “Fucking someone I love is its own poetry. You’re an artist—you understand that.”

Warm fuzzies fluttered inside me. This felt good, talking to them and joking with them. It felt right. And now that we had the important conversation out of the way, we could get on to the fun stuff. “We have the house to ourselves for the night. It’d be a shame to waste this opportunity.”

Tanner drew his thumb over my cheek “Did I mention the sexy fucking mind? I do like the way you think.” He brushed his lips over mine so lightly it was more of a suggestion than a kiss.

I felt it all the way to my toes anyway.

“Did you have something specific in mind?” Colin brushed my hair over one shoulder, and dragged his mouth along the back of my neck. “Or do you want to play it by ear?”

I was very much a *go into things with a plan* person, and it terrified me to play any of this by ear—even a night of sex. But the excitement and anticipation were delicious, and I was eager to see what came next. “Tanner’s got a bum arm, so we should probably go easy on him.”

“Hmm.” Colin’s murmur rumbled over my skin. “Fair point.”

“I can do more with one good arm than most people can do with both.” Tanner scoffed.

I leaned away from him and into Colin. “Like watch?”

“Definitely not. Not today.” Tanner knelt to lean into us both. “This is definitely going to be a hand-on kind of evening.”

I did have one requirement though. “Bedroom. Door locked.” A teensy bit of me both worried and hoped they’d argue—no one else was here, no one was expected to be.

“Agreed.” Tanner stood and grasped one of my hands.

Colin was on his feet as well, the two of them tugging me to mine.

When we made it upstairs and closed ourselves off from the rest of the world, I was instantly pulled into a flurry of kisses and touches. Tanner crushing his mouth to mine to devour my groans. Colin stealing me away to nip at my lips, then kiss a trail along my jaw and neck. The two of them

pulling into each other in a long kiss that was so easy and natural, and so fucking sexy.

Then their mouths were on me again. I was swept up by the intensity wrapping around all of us, and I wanted more. I'd missed having them here. Feeling them. And I needed more of it. I undid the buttons on Tanner's shirt, hungry for more.

The three of us stripped each other out of everything, pausing every few seconds to kiss or lick or nibble on each other. And when we were finally naked, the heat of our bodies molded together was delicious. I couldn't believe I was a part of this, or that I'd almost had to surrender it.

Tanner moved behind me. He dragged his mouth up my shoulder, along my neck, and paused to nip my earlobes.

I moaned at the delicious sensation and leaned my weight into him for more, letting his erection dig into my ass cheek and tease me.

Colin stayed in front of me, but lowered his head to draw one of my nipples into his mouth. The longer he suckled, the more my hips swayed with need. I clenched my thighs together, but the pulse wouldn't be sated this way.

When Colin glided his hand down my stomach, my anticipation spiked. He dipped between my legs and I gasped at his touch. At the build-up to what came next. He slid lower along my slick skin, and dipped two fingers inside me. I was used to penetration as a main course, not an appetizer, and I liked this variation on an old classic.

The longer Colin pumped inside me, with Tanner trailing his hand over so much of my body, the further I sank into the pleasure. When Colin pulled out, disappointment glimmered

inside, but it vanished in a flash when he glided up to trace circles around my clit.

I bucked against the fresh touch against my hyper sensitive sex, and wanted more. The longer he teased and stroked, the more my desire built, until it crashed down around me, spilling through me with climax.

Colin eased his touch away from the swollen nub, and kissed me again. Hard. Hungrily. Devouring my gasps before letting Tanner tug me away for more of the same.

With the initial need dialed to a high simmer, I could imagine next steps. I turned to Tanner. “With that arm, I think you’re going to have to be passive in most of this.”

“She’s right, you know,” Colin said.

Tanner raised an eyebrow. “I can do a lot with one arm.”

“I promise you’ll like this.” I pressed a hand to his chest and nudged him toward the bed. “Lie down.”

He stared back in disbelief, but complied.

I didn’t try to hide the way I raked my gaze over his nude, prone form. Stunning. Statuesque. Tauntingly erect. “Don’t move”

His jaw dropped as I turned away. I felt two pairs of eyes on me as I made my way into the bathroom to grab two condoms and lube from the locked cabinet.

When I returned, my skin was on fire at the heat of their gazes, watching me walk naked across the bedroom. My pulse hammered in my ears and I shrugged off any insecurities about what I did or didn’t need to hide.

I handed one rubber to Colin and rolled the other onto Tanner. I slid up Tanner’s body, and he moved his good hand

to my thigh to squeeze. Every touch sent jolts of want racing over me.

I reached his cock, and glided my still-wet pussy back and forth along the shaft, teasing until he was groaning and digging his fingers into my leg. I rose enough to position him at my opening. His strangled groan as I lowered myself, driving him inside me, was intoxicating.

This was amazing. So very close to perfect. Not just because Tanner was inside me and Colin pressed into my back, sandwiching me between two hot, younger men. The fantasy aspect was off the charts. But even better—I knew these men. Their hearts. Their minds. What they were capable of.

And I knew I wanted them both. In my bedroom, in my life, and in my future.

colin

THERE WAS no universe where it wasn't *hot* to watch Daria with Tanner. The way she rode him... I swore I could feel it.

I needed to be part of this connection, though. I knelt behind Daria, my legs digging into Tanner's, and molded myself to her back when I drew her upright. I needed to memorize every inch of flesh on flesh from the three of us intertwined with each other.

The soft curve of her ass cushioned my erection as I glided my hands up her stomach to cup her breasts. She rocked in a gentle rhythm against Tanner. I licked along her shoulder to suck on her neck. "Do you mind if I leave marks?"

Daria's laugh caught me off-guard. "I've never been asked that before."

"I figured given everything..." I didn't want to do anything that would cause friction—hers or mine—with her kids.

"I'm not complaining, and no I don't mind."

I loved the sound of her *yes* as much as the soft gasps she made when I sucked along the soft skin where her neck met her shoulder.

She leaned more of her weight against me and pressed her cheek to mine. “I want you both in me,” she said.

“I like the sound of that.” I reached past her to grab the lube.

She squealed in surprise when I pressed a cool slick touch to her skin, but relaxed quickly as I teased her opening with my finger. She leaned forward into Tanner, and he spread one cheek. I slipped a digit inside her, helping her loosen up and relax for something bigger.

“The teasing is killing me.” Tanner’s chuckle was tight.

I completely understood. “Daria?”

She nodded. “Definitely ready. Mostly. Go slowly.”

“Of course.” I gripped my shaft and nudged the head of my cock against her rear hole.

She relaxed to let me in, and I slid forward one agonizingly slow inch at a time, until she was wrapped around me, tight and hot, Tanner pressing against me.

The rhythmic rocking resumed, slow and steady. I gripped her hip with one hand, and slipped the other between Daria and Tanner to her clit.

Her entire body jumped, and she clenched around me, when I found my target. Her gasps grew louder, becoming moans, the longer I stroked, and pumped in time with Tanner.

There was a pause where she held her breath, and the entire room seemed to freeze for a heartbeat in time. And then the cry that tore from her throat, breathy and reckless, blanketed all of us. The incredible sound snapped a restraint I didn’t realize had been holding me back.

I let go, pounding hard and fast, matching Tanner thrust for thrust, as Daria's body shuddered in pleasure. I was lost in the experience, falling into the sparkles that flashed behind my eyelids. Losing myself in her heat. In Tanner's grunts. In the bubble of reality encasing us.

I lost track of where their groans of pleasure ended and mine began, and flew into the ecstasy building inside me. Orgasm flooded my limbs, tightened in my balls, spilled from me, and left my mind blissfully blank.

Tanner's jerking, the sound of his pending climax, was already deliciously familiar, and I knew he was coming too.

The pounding didn't slow until my body demanded it, and even then I was reluctant to stop. There was time. For more of this. For more wrapping myself up in these feelings and these two people. But I was still greedy and wanted more now.

I could wait a little while to recharge. Just a little.

We lay there, sandwiched on top of each other, until Tanner pointed out his leg was cramping. The three of us disentangled long enough to clean up, then crawled into bed next to each other.

Lying here next to both of them was perfect. "I missed this. I know we won't be doing it all the time. Not yet, but..."

"So you haven't changed your minds." There was a hitch in Daria's voice.

Tanner raised his eyebrows and looked between her and me. "Excuse you, what?"

Daria shrugged. "Now that we've had the dirty, yummy sex and gotten that out of our systems for the night, you're still interested in everything that comes with the package that is Daria?"

“Every single inch of you.” He kissed her on the nose.

“You know I mean more than me.” She blushed, despite the guarded question.

I didn’t know how to make this clearer, beyond reassurance and just proving we meant what we said, but I was happy to assure her again and again. “We do know that, yes. We meant everything we said downstairs. I missed you, I love you, and I want you both—all—in my life.”

“Same.” Daria’s smile was back, lighting up a gorgeous face. “To everything you just said, I feel the same.”

“Of course you do,” Tanner teased.

She laughed. “Ass.”

He kissed her, then leaned past her to brush his lips over mine. “I couldn’t be luckier.”

Warmth filled me. This was the family I never thought I’d have. Yes, I had Brooke and her kids, and they were great, but this was different. Its own kind of love and closeness. This was what so many people had told me in my life that I didn’t deserve, because of my preferences.

But I had it. And even though I wasn’t a look-to-the-future kind of guy, I saw all the potential stretching out before us. This was going to be incredible.

tanner

I'D BEEN DATING Colin and Daria for almost two weeks, and the experience, the bond, was incredible. I wasn't always a fan of heading home without her at the end of the night, but the fact that I got to go with him helped. And it was both surreal and a blast to head out as a pseudo-family.

Tonight was an excuse to go to Buck E. Cheese without looking like a weird creeper. This place wasn't quite the wonderland I remembered from childhood, but it was still a blast.

Alana had proclaimed she was going to beat me at skeeball, but that I wasn't supposed to hold back.

"My right arm is taped to my side. I don't have a choice but to hold back," I said.

She shrugged. "Sounds like your problem. You never know when battle might happen. You have to be prepared."

"I'm pretty sure that's not how that saying goes." With some kids, I'd hold back regardless. With my ultra-competitive, star swimmer, there was no way. In her shoes, I'd be offended if I gave anything but my best. I grabbed the first ball with my left hand, and lobbed it easily into a 100 spot.

Alana scoffed. “Amateur.” She matched me almost shot for shot. Almost.

“Someone’s been training.” I was genuinely impressed. I didn’t realize kids still played games like this—not that I’d phrase it that way to her.

She scowled and dropped tokens in the two machines, pulling up another round of balls. “Again.”

“Alana, don’t push him too hard,” Daria called from the table a few feet away.

Did that make my manliness bristle just a little, that a thirteen-year-old was supposed to go easy on me? Just a little. “I’m fine.” I tossed the first ball.

“See, Mom, he’s *fine*.” Alana mimicked the motion.

Behind us, I heard Harmony leading Colin back from the ball pit, while she told him about the next chapter in her unicorn—previously a pony but now ascended—story.

I couldn’t help a smile at how comfortable this all was. Like it was meant to be this way. I took my next shot.

Once again, Alana and I were evenly matched. We each had one ball left, and were tied, when my phone rang. A glance at the screen said it was the banker Daria had referred us to. The one we’d been waiting on an answer from for an agonizingly long amount of time. “I need to take this. You win.”

“I don’t win until I beat you fair and square. Teach me how to throw left-handed?”

“Practice. You know how it works.” I called as I walked toward the table. “This is Tanner,” I said into the phone.

Daria and Colin both gave me curious looks when I sat at the table. Harmony looked between them, and was silent as well.

“Tanner, hi. It’s Stephen Rodgers. I’m sorry to call so late.”

“It’s fine.” My stomach was tying in knots. Even if he said *no* it would be an answer, but I wasn’t as prepared for a *no* as I wanted to pretend. “What can I do for you?”

“After some close review of your proposal, your assets, and your expertise, we’d like to work with you on this loan.”

My mind had already jumped ahead to *we’ve decided to go in another direction*, and I had to backtrack to process what he’d really said. “Wait, what? Really?” Not so professional. “I mean, of course. That’s fantastic news. Thank you.”

Colin’s brows shot up, and Daria’s smile grew.

“I’ll email you the initial paperwork and terms. Once you’ve reviewed, we can start scheduling appointments and moving forward,” Stephen said.

“Yeah. Of course. Thank you.” I was repeating myself. I managed to focus enough to wrap up the important details, and end the call professionally. The instant I disconnected I let out a loud *whoop*. “We got the loan. We’re getting our school.”

“I knew you would.” Daria grinned.

“We had someone amazing help us finalize our plans.” I owed her so much thanks for this.

She shook her head. “The best proposal doesn’t hide a shitty idea. You have a great plan, I just put a bow on it.”

Colin hadn’t said anything.

I didn't like that. "Colin?" Had this changed his mind?

He finally broke into the biggest smile. "It's about time. This is going to be freaking epic."

"Freaking epic. Freaking epic," Harmony sang a tuneless melody.

And Colin was right—like usual. Getting the business loan was amazing, but this dynamic here, this family, *this* was better than epic. This was a better future than I ever would've dared imagine.

epilogue

Daria

Eight Months Later

The Grand Reopening sign was a generic banner—something Tanner picked up at a store—but it made me smile to see it decorating the front of the rec center.

The building had been closed for several months, but since a lot of that was over the fall and winter months, Colin and Tanner had already expected the loss in clients. I was amazed they'd pulled together the full remodel in such a short amount of time. And now that they'd fixed up the entire building, not just the pool, they'd be open year-round going forward.

The place had been unofficially open for a month or so, with the new instructors and trainers all getting used to the schedules. Tanner was doing as much swimming as he was allowed, and pretending not to sulk when other trainers had to take on more of the load. But he was healing nicely from the surgery and he'd be back to almost full strength soon enough.

Colin wasn't teaching much swimming, though he did have one younger class. He was teaching art classes, which Harmony loved since she'd gotten bored with swimming. He had a few after school programs for the younger kids, and they all adored him.

Tonight was a school expo of sorts, including a swimming match to let the older students show off, and draw in new families. Alana had been talking non-stop for weeks about competing. Tanner never treated her differently than the other swimmers in class, not giving her leniency or making things harder on her.

She ate up the fairness of it all. If she was going to win, it would be because she earned it. And she was going to win—she said so on a regular basis.

Both girls had come early with Colin and Tanner, to finish set-up. I'd tried to talk them out of it, but all of them insisted it would be fine.

Inside, I found Carly with Brooke, who we'd become good friends with over the past few months. They were walking from the gym toward the pool, both of them with small plates heaped with brownies and cookies.

"I don't think you're supposed to bring those into the pool area," I said, falling into step with them.

Carly shoved a brownie at me, and picked a cookie from her stack. "I guess we'd better eat them before we get there, then." She shoved the entire thing in her mouth.

Brooke snorted and shook her head. "Match starts in just a few minutes."

"Dmnit," Carly mumbled through cookie crumbs. She wrapped the rest of her plate in a napkin, and set it gently on the top of her purse.

I couldn't help but laugh. "If you had kids, that wouldn't be safe in there for even ten seconds." I ate the brownie quickly, though not as fast as she'd managed with her sweet.

Carly swallowed. “Reason number seven-thousand-ninety-two why I don’t.” She hugged her purse to her chest. “No one better step on this.”

We stepped into the pool area, where people were already gathering on the bleachers. I saw Alana with Tanner and her team, at the far end of the pool, and waved. When we were settled, I sent Colin a text. *We’re here.*

Be there soon, his reply came through seconds later.

Carly, Brooke, and I settled into a spot big enough for us plus two more, and Carly nudged me. She jerked her head toward the door.

Joe was here. I expected to feel a surge of emotion. Instead a little pity and disdain flitted in, but not much more.

“Is it true?” Carly asked.

I studied my ex-husband from across the room. His face was drawn, and the bags under his eyes were visible from here. He was dressed in jeans, which I think I’d seen maybe twice since we got married. The threat I’d made months ago, to ruin his career... He hadn’t needed my help. “Is what true?” I asked innocently.

Carly raised her eyebrows. “You know what.”

“I don’t gossip.” Which was why I knew this and she didn’t. It had been killing me to keep this to myself, but I almost felt bad that there was a hint of smugness when I thought about it. Almost.

“You’re fucking kidding me right now,” Carly said.

I sighed. “It’s true. He was caught screwing the boss’s daughter.” Adult daughter. Barely. She was twenty-two, and I hoped for her sake that she’d learned and moved on to

someone better. “It’s my understanding that he can’t get anyone to take his calls.”

Brooke sucked in a breath. “Ouch.”

“I mean... No one made him put his dick in her, so—”

“*Daddy*,” Harmony’s shout cut me off, and I immediately homed in on my girl, in the hallway and speed-walking toward the doorway.

Joe’s face lit up and he turned toward the sound.

Harmony cut in a completely different direction, toward Colin, and handed him a large sheet of paper I assumed was her latest artwork. Colin smiled and crouched to bring himself to her eye-level. She was too far away for me to hear anything softer than a yell, but the way she waved her arms and her animated expressions led me to believe she was telling him the story behind the picture.

“He really is cute with her,” Carly said.

I couldn’t agree more. Colin and Tanner were both good with the girls. I loved that they helped around the house, but more I loved that they were there, and part of the family. I could tell they meant it. That they loved me. Loved the kids. Loved each other. I never would’ve imagined something like this was possible even with one guy, especially after Joe, but I wouldn’t trade what I had with these men.

Harmony grabbed Colin’s hand and tugged him toward us. She paused long enough to wave at Joe, then climbed up the bleachers to sit between Colin and me. “Mommy, it’s us in Italy.” She handed me her drawing.

We hadn’t been yet, but as soon as Harmony overheard me talking to Carly about maybe making the trip, she’d started with the plans. I took the picture from her, and sure enough, all

five of us were standing in a row, in front of... I pointed to the large, tower-like thing in the background. "Tell me about this," I said.

"That's the Eiffel tower." Harmony said. "And the Ferris wheel. And the opera house." She pointed at the different images.

I knew if I looked at Carly, she'd either be wincing or trying to swallow a laugh. A glance past Colin, at Brooke, showed a soft smile playing on her face.

"Let's have a geography story when we get home," Colin suggested.

Harmony clapped. *Lessons* were no fun, but *stories* about where famous architecture actually lived was very much her thing.

A whistle echoed through the room, and the loud chatter died to a low roar. A voice came over the loudspeaker—one of Tanner's new swim coaches—announcing the start of the exhibition match. The races were fast-paced and intense. Single elimination, narrowing down the swimmers until there were two left.

Alana made it all the way to the finals, and came in a heartbeat behind the winner. Her scowl was obvious from here, and I knew this was going to hurt. As far as she was concerned, second place was first loser.

But she was gracious with her smile and shaking the other girl's hand, before they ran off to the locker rooms to change.

After the awards ceremony, and everything broke up, we drifted back to the gym where the refreshments were. Carly already had her cookies back out and was pleased they weren't

crushed. She even offered one to Harmony, who looked at me questioningly before accepting.

Tanner and Alana joined us a few minutes later. Carly and Brooke congratulated her.

Her smile was tighter up close. “Thank you,” Alana was polite. “But I’ll actually deserve it next time.”

“You’ll kick butt, next time.” Tanner said.

Alana scoffed. “Yeah, I will.” She glanced over her shoulder, then looked at me. “Can I go say hi to Joe?”

I didn’t bother to correct her. “Do you want company?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Can I go with?” Harmony asked.

Alana nodded, and took her hand. I may be smug that Joe had screwed himself out of work, but I didn’t ever want the girls hurting because of it. Alana and Harmony walked toward him.

He smiled when he saw them. The hug from Harmony was genuine and sweet, but the one with Alana was wooden and awkward. Whatever the three had to talk about didn’t take long. As Alana and Harmony turned away from him, he walked out of the room.

When the girls reached us again, Alana asked, “Can I have a cookie? And go talk to my friends?”

“We should probably do the same. The mingling thing,” Tanner said.

“Then shoo. All of you.” I made waving motions, then took Harmony’s hand when the other three scattered.

“You all really are good together.” Was that wistfulness in Carly’s voice?

Brooke sighed softly. “You really are. You’re lucky, you know.”

I did know. Everything about my relationship with Tanner and Colin, and theirs with Harmony and Alana, was right. This was the way life should be. A life I wouldn’t give back for anything.

Thank you for falling in love along with Daria, Colin, and Tanner.

For more sexy, geeky threesomes, and to meet Daria’s brother, Dustin, check out [RANDOM ENCOUNTER](#). Adrienne is starting her dream job as a video game artist. But the game requires her to recreate some intimate and kinky bedroom scenes, and she’s lacking experience. Fortunately, her sexy co-workers have her back... her front... and everything in between with hands-on lessons.

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the agreement

Three Player Grind Book 2

For my eternal dragon

I

brooke

HOW MANY PEOPLE in this town would be scandalized if they knew the case I was pulling from the trunk of my car contained two nude angels, intertwined in a passionate celebration?

In my experience, almost as many as were horrified that I'd stayed single for the last fifteen years, since my husband passed. How dare I have raised my twins by myself, rather than finding a man to take care of us?

The gossip used to bother me, but now it was easier to remind myself that people were funny. If they ever realized why this shop was named the way it was—*Deacon's Derelicts and D'Art*—or admitted that they knew, they'd probably die of small-town humiliation.

“*Oh shit. Duck.*” The call was accompanied by the buzz of a small electric motor.

I dropped the case and my head under the hood of the trunk before my brain processed what I was hearing. If I was at Deacon's antique shop and Adam's panicked voice barked an order, it was best to obey first and ask questions later.

A drone slammed into the trunk and clattered to the ground with a pathetic whine, then died.

“Is it safe?” I asked.

“Yes. *Fuck*. Sorry. *Fuck*.” Adam scooped the motorized plane from its resting place. He straightened as I did. “You okay?”

“I’m good.”

He ran his hand along the tail end of my partly restored ’57 Chevy Bel Air. “And your baby is okay?”

“She’s fine. But only because we haven’t repainted this sexy behind yet,” I teased. “Did your friend survive?” I nodded at his droid.

He shook his head. “I thought I was so close to getting it right this time.”

Adam was a modern-day mad scientist. Happy scientist? His current expression of frustration plus bemusement was as close as I ever saw him to angry. “Meh, back to the drawing board. Let me carry that in for you,” he said. With dark hair and a square jaw, it would be easy for him to look stern all the time, but instead, there was always a wildness in his eyes and a smile on his lips.

I stepped aside and let him grab the leather briefcase that held my latest restoration project. Muscle rippled under his T-shirt with the stretch. He was a genius-scientist meets romance-novel-cover-model, and I always felt a bit decadent and naughty, watching him work.

That would give the townspeople something to talk about—the forty-year-old widow with two basically adult twins, hooking up with the newcomer to town who was eight years younger.

Not that I’d ever hook up with Adam. Or Deacon. I was older, laden with baggage and kids, and my conservative

upbringing still ruled most of my instincts. I didn't mind how frequently Adam cussed, but it wasn't something I could do, and that was just one example.

I'd also only ever been with one man—my late husband. I was pretty sure Adam and Deacon were not only together, no matter how much they denied it, but also both fine with the other seeing other people.

Plus, fantasizing about either of them definitely made for the kind of dreams I'd been told as a child would earn me a one-way ticket to Hell.

We stepped through the front door of the antique shop, and an electric tune greeted us. That was new.

“Addams Family?” I looked at Adam.

“I'm trying out different things. What do you think?”

“How'd the test flight go?” Deacon called from somewhere in the shop before I could answer.

“It was as grand and memorable as the maiden voyage of The Titanic.” Adam led the way, carrying my case further into the store. “But I rescued a damsel in distress from the sinking boat.”

We rounded the corner on a row of shelves filled with classic lunchboxes, to find Deacon behind the register. The vase of orange poppies next to him was the only new thing in this place, and I loved the contrast of the fresh flowers with a shop full of antiques.

He looked at me with a smirk. “*Damsel?*”

Deacon was as yummy to look at as Adam, but in a different way. Until about a month ago, his dirty-blond hair had been pulled back into a bun on the top of his head. He'd

shaved it all for a charity event, but he swore he'd grow it back. Long sleeves hid arms and a back toned from years of manual labor, as well as some sexy as heck tattoos. He was gorgeous in that I-used-to-be-wild-and-I-still-act-like-it-but-really-I've-settled-down kind of way.

I shrugged. "I was almost taken out by Skynet's grandmother. I'm quite distressed."

"You don't look it." The way Deacon trailed his gaze over me left a wave of heat that would've melted even the most stubborn iceberg, flooding my body.

I hid the reaction under a ridiculous pantomime of wide eyes and holding my hands in front of my face. "Ah. I'm distressed."

"And now you've traumatized my favorite customer. Way to go." Deacon's scowl at Adam was exaggerated.

"What? Chicks dig electric toys," Adam said.

Deacon sighed and rolled his eyes. "We talked about this. Chicks dig toys that vibrate, slide between their legs, and—"

"You need to see what I found." I set my case on the wooden counter with a much heavier *thud* than I needed. If I let him finish that thought, I was likely to turn bright red while my brain shut down. It had taken long enough for me to hear sexually crude language without blushing—I didn't have a problem with it; I just wasn't accustomed to it—but when it came from one of them, my imagination liked to take the words and run.

Even now, I was trying not to fall into the fantasy of Deacon between my legs, showing me tricks my little bullet vibrator never could. I was going to need some me-time when

I got home. Rather than fall into that now, I flipped the latches on the briefcase and lifted the lid.

“No shit.” Deacon’s awe was audible. He grabbed the microfiber cloth I had packed in the case and used it to lift out one of the hand-sculpted, gold-flaked lead figures. My specialty was creating unique figures or restoring old ones. This particular set was an original Brooke. Three characters from The Sandman graphic novels—Dream, Desire, and Destiny.

I started lead sculpting when I was in high school, but it wasn’t anything big in my life. I made cute little ladybugs and ribbons because I could. When I lost my husband, I had no idea what I was going to do for money. He’d left us enough to pay off the house and survive for a little while, and I made it stretch, but it wasn’t going to last forever.

When a neighbor mentioned they’d been struggling to find a restorer for a hood ornament on their classic Duesenberg but everyone charged a fortune, I asked if I could give it a try. He said he didn’t have anything to lose, so he let me at it. The experiment was a success. I realized quickly I could charge a few thousand for a job everyone else wanted ten times as much for.

It was how I met Deacon—I liked to trawl antique shops for items in need of repair and restoration to sell between jobs.

Deacon set the Endless figures tenderly back in their case and frowned. “I can’t take them right now. I really wish I could.”

“You can take them. They’re a gift.” I nudged the case closer. “You’ve been wanting these forever.”

“They’re gorgeous. I can tell you how much you’ll get for them on the open market. They’d be wasted here.”

I glared at him. “I’m not concerned about how much they’re worth.” I let the hurt at his refusal of my gift slip into my reply. “I did the work for you. Not because you asked me to or because I want to be paid, but because it’s something you’ve wanted.”

“I’m staying out of this.” Adam took a step back.

Deacon scrubbed his face. “They’re gorgeous. They really are. And I’m grateful. But”—he pushed out a hiss between his teeth—“I just won’t have a place to display them in a month or two.”

“What?” My wounded pride vanished, and I stared at him, hoping he didn’t mean what I was assuming. “Why not?”

“Someone purchased a lot of the property on Main Street. Big developer. They’re going to *revitalize*. I have to update the shop to meet the new design specs set out by the city council, or I’m out.”

No. “That can’t be right. What about zoning laws and approval? And you own the property.”

“Have you ever read Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy?” Adam asked.

What did that— Oh. “Yeah, yeah. *The plans have been on display for months. Locked in the basement.* But that’s not actually legal.”

“It is, when you have the kind of money these guys do and the lawyers to find the loopholes. The town charter requires me to sell to them if I can’t meet building requirements, and they seem determined to give the entire block a more modern

look.” Deacon shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. It’s done. I’ll deal with the fallout. How are you?”

I wasn’t letting him off so easily. I’d answer his question with proof that my random boring life wasn’t at stake, and then direct things back to his shop. “You know. Pre-empty nest syndrome, as I watch the twins get ready for their Sweetheart’s Dance.”

“You need to get yourself a maahhaan.” Adam’s retort was a poor imitation of a drawl.

I shot him a withering look. I recognized the teasing, but I’d been hearing people say that and mean it for years. The people at church said it first to my face, and then behind my back when I stopped attending. “Thanks. Hadn’t had that idea before.”

“No. Hang on. He’s got a point,” Deacon said.

They were not going to shift this conversation to me. Especially not this way.

“Don’t even start,” I said.

He gave me a look that said, *You know me better than that.* “Hear me out. It’s not that you *need a man*, but you need more people to hang out with. Dating is one way.”

I hang out here. With you two. But I didn’t really. I visited and always made it about work, so I wouldn’t have to admit to them or myself that I was here as much for the company and visuals as anything. I didn’t have a lot of adult friends. My brother’s girlfriend. Her best friend. But they had their own busy lives.

And I hadn’t dated at all since my husband passed away. First, I was too grief-stricken, and then, I was raising my kids.

Could Deacon and Adam teach me how to meet a guy? They knew what men their age liked. I didn't want a younger man. Not that the two of them were that much younger, but eight years still seemed like a lot...

And now I was picturing all the yummy things either of them could teach me about relationships. When did I become such a horndog?

"My point is, my life is status quo. Yeah, maybe I'll start dating again—not that I've had any luck so far." Why did I say that?

"How are you not having any luck dating?" Adam's question sounded sincere rather than taunting.

Me and my big mouth. I sighed. "First of all, I'm looking at the town's two most eligible bachelors." *Keep talking before one of them grabs that and runs with it.* "Where am I supposed to meet someone? I'm not a bar person. Or a church person anymore." I still had my faith, but it wasn't attached to the religion I'd grown up in, and I wasn't always on the best of terms with Him. "Dating apps? I had one of those installed for about two weeks. Swiping right... Do you know how many dicks are out there, messaging with inane and trite lines?"

"Enough to make you use the word *dicks* apparently." Adam sounded amused.

He was earning my full supply of withering looks today, but he had a point.

"I'm not surprised every guy wants to know you." There was Deacon again with the kind of boldness I rarely knew how to respond to.

This time, I did. "It's like this for every woman on a dating site. I've had it confirmed."

“Or your friends are almost as hot as you are,” Adam said.

My cheeks heated. “Or I’m more of an antique than half the things in this shop, so I look like an easy target.”

“*Hey.*” Deacon’s voice was sharp. He reached across the counter to loosely grasp my chin and looked me in the eye. “I would put you on any display shelf, but you deserve better. And you are *not* an antique.”

The power in his voice stole my thoughts and my breath.

I reluctantly pulled away from his touch. “You can’t lose your shop. We have to find a way to save it.” I needed this conversation on anything but me, my lack of a love life, and the faint scent of Deacon’s cologne mixed with wood and sunshine.

“There’s not a way. Adam and I have been brainstorming for days,” Deacon said.

“And I’m super creative when it comes to new ideas,” Adam added.

He was a brilliant idea guy, but that didn’t mean he’d thought of everything.

“You didn’t brainstorm with me.” Why was I pushing this so hard? Right, because I loved this shop, and Deacon *was* a friend. *A few days* of brainstorming wasn’t enough. “I could help you find a solution.”

Deacon worked his jaw, and Adam looked between him and me.

“Give me a good reason why the three of us shouldn’t at least try.” I forced the challenge into my voice.

2

deacon

I DIDN'T WANT to lose my antique store. I loved my little corner of rural-burbia. *Rural-bania? Rural-banalia?*

Besides, the shop had been in the family for generations in one form or another. If I lost it now, I'd never forgive myself.

Brooke was brilliant—and far more stunning than she realized, though that was beside the point—but I had no idea how anyone could get me out of the fact that this shop barely stayed solvent. It wasn't like I could just *try harder* to make enough to comply with the new building codes.

I'd be doing myself, my shop, and Brooke a disservice, if I didn't keep looking for answers and hear her out, though. "Give me at least one good reason why you don't deserve to find a man who loves you for who you are," I said.

What was I doing?

Based on the twin looks of shock staring back at me, Brooke and Adam wondered the same thing.

"Because your shop is an amazing and wonderful thing, and my love life has been non-existent for more than a decade. I don't even know how to date anymore," Brooke said.

Too late to take back what I'd said. If I made light of it, it could be seen as making light of her love life. She deserved

adoration and worship, not teasing. “Adam and I do. And if you’re helping me figure out how to keep the shop open, it’s only fair I offer something in return.”

Adam raised his brows, and his thoughts were almost audible. He was asking what the fuck I was doing. Why I didn’t just ask Brooke out.

I didn’t have to wonder about what Adam’s look meant, because it was a conversation we’d had before.

Brooke wasn’t my standard hookup. She wasn’t a hookup kind of woman at all. She was flowers and dinners and a real courtship and marriage and a family, and she deserved someone who wanted the same.

Regardless of how often I fantasized about handcuffing her to my bed frame and finding out how many ways I could make her scream in pleasure.

How did I know she wasn’t interested? Last time I’d cranked up the flirting, she tried to set me up with her brother.

“Me helping you keep your shop open has nothing to do with favors. You don’t owe me.” Brooke sounded wounded.

That was the last thing I wanted. “And me helping you get back into dating isn’t about favors either, but you’re looking for something, I’m looking for something...”

“Seems like a reasonable agreement to me.” Adam always had my back.

“I’d like your help regardless,” I said, “but this lets me do something for you in return.”

She chewed her bottom lip, making it look even plumper and rosier. *Fuck*, I wanted to be doing that for her. I’d settle for knowing someone else was.

Brooke's soft smile returned. "All right. It's a deal. But we start with your thing, because it's more time sensitive and has greater consequences if we don't figure it out now."

Hard logic to argue with. "What have you got, idea-wise?" I asked her.

"It depends on what you need to do to your place, to bring it up to the new zoning requirements."

I grabbed the tablet from under the counter that I used for inventory and shop notes, pulled up the research I'd done so far, and slid her the device. "I'd have to update the exterior and make some minor changes to the interior. The facade will be the bulk of the cost. Oh, and the new taxes."

As I talked, I flipped through images Adam had worked up for me, to match the city's new requirements, and finished on a rough estimate.

Brooke sucked on her teeth. "Ouch."

Not encouraging. "Tell me about it."

"Let's start with what you have on hand." She pulled the hair tie off her wrist and used it to tie back her black hair that normally trailed halfway down her back. Perfect length for wrapping around my fist and yanking while I fucked her from behind.

Considering how bright red she turned with light flirting, I was worried she'd walk out and never come back if I got even half as graphic with my words as my imagination wanted me to. I spent a lot more time than I probably should, thinking about the best way to ease her into a more intense conversation. Prodding at her edges and seeing if she was one of those good girls who could go bad. I suspected the answer was *yes*.

That would wait. “I think you’ve seen everything in the main shop. Most of what’s in the back room is there because it either needs work or isn’t worth the work.” The back half of the building was dedicated to overflow. “What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know yet. Right now, I’m wandering to see what comes to mind,” Brooke said. “What about the basement? I’ve never been down there.”

I frowned. “I don’t have a basement.”

She stared back. “Yes, you do.”

“I think I’d know if I had a basement.”

Brooke held up one finger. “The building has a foundation showing above ground, rather than being on a pad.” She held up a second finger. “There’s a hollow sound when you walk across the floor... Okay, so maybe I don’t need to count my reasons. There are only two, but they’re good ones.”

“She makes some valid points,” Adam said.

Sure, her logic made perfect sense, with one tiny problem. “I’ve been through every inch of this shop, and I’ve never seen a basement entrance. My grandparents never mentioned one. I basically grew up in this place, and I’ve spent more of my life here than I have in my house. I’d know if there was a basement.”

“I swear to you, there’s a basement for this building.” Brooke extended her hand. “I’d bet on it. Five bucks.”

I wanted something tastier. Like Brooke. But not as a wager. Especially since I knew my shop, and I was going to win. “I want one of your pecan pies.”

“I’d make you one anyway if you asked.”

“That’s not the point. You’d give me five bucks if I asked.”
And I’d do the same for her.

Her smile was bright, confident, and just as gorgeous as flustered-Brooke. “Fair. What do I get when I’m right?”

Adam flipped his gaze between us like he was watching a tennis match. “I say if she’s right, she should get first pick of whatever we find down there.”

“She’s not right, so that’s fine with me.” This was as much a matter of pride as anything now. I hollered at Dylan to watch the shop and text me if he needed me. “Where do you think this mythical basement entrance will be?” I asked Brooke. My tone was light. We wouldn’t find anything, but the view would be good and the company would be better.

Brooke looked around us. “Probably not in the windows.”

“Probably not.” A shin-to-ceiling wall of glass faced the street.

“No space in the walls between you and the neighbors?”

“Enough for insulation and bricks,” Adam said.

Brooke nodded. “Then there’s something in the back.”

Too easy. But I couldn’t pass up the opportunity. “You want to check, Adam?”

“Always.” He took a few steps away from the counter and focused on Brooke’s behind. “A gorgeous ass that looks even better in good jeans. You’re right, Brooke, there is something in back.”

Her perturbed look didn’t hide her blush or the threatening smile underneath. “Fine. Be boys. If that’s what it takes to get you to follow me.” She spun, her scowl vanishing into a smirk

before she finished her turn, and her ass swaying as she strode away.

Adam and I fell into step beside her. We strode past knickknacks, past the bulk of the main floor where the furniture was on display, and through the door that led to the back portion of the building.

There was about half as much space back here as up front, and it was about twice as full of overflow. Furniture I'd swapped out when they hadn't sold. Fixtures Adam swore could be fixed. Figurines I'd set aside for Brooke. And other random odds and ends I wasn't sure what to do with, but I knew I needed to hold onto.

Despite us all having agreed there was no room in the walls for something like a door or stairs, Brooke headed to the edge of the room first. "The walls are thicker back here." She rapped lightly on the painted brick.

"I didn't say anything." I stood a few feet back with Adam.

She glanced over her shoulder. "You were thinking it. Are you going to help me look?"

"Not part of the bet. But I will teach you the best way to tell a guy he kisses like a fish and show him how to do it right."

Adam snorted. "Lot of practice with that?"

"More than I care to remember."

Brooke rolled her eyes and moved to the next part of the wall.

Teasing her had its moments, but I wasn't enough of an asshole to stand and watch while someone else did the work. I joined her a few feet down, and Adam fell in on her other side.

“I expect you to tell me if you hear something hollow, and not hide it so you can win,” Brooke teased.

I grinned. “I’m winning fair and square. Nothing to hide.”

Searching the walls didn’t take us long, and then she moved to the rear entrance. There was nothing outside but a blank wall.

“The brick looks different over there.” She pointed to an area about six feet wide that came up just a few feet on the building. Not nearly tall enough to be a doorway.

It was weird to say *it’s newer*, given that the work was supposedly done almost a century ago, but it was definitely a different size and shape. “My grandpa told me some yahoo got pissed at his grandpa and ran a sledgehammer through it.”

“A random dude with a sledgehammer knocked out a perfect rectangle in the original brick?” Adam sounded skeptical.

I frowned. It never occurred to me how weak that sounded, until now.

“Really.” Brooke headed inside again and cut as straight a line as was possible through the rows of shelves protruding from the back wall. They weren’t built in, but they’d been here for ages and were heavy as fuck to move. Fortunately, I’d never found a reason to do so.

She pressed a finger to her lips. *Shh.*

I wanted to ask if we were hunting wabbits, but she looked so focused, I had to keep my mouth shut. She walked up through the shelves with a heavy step. “I should’ve worn heels, to get a different echo,” she muttered, then looked at me. “Can I borrow a pair?”

“Not sure his shoes are going to fit you,” Adam said.

But I knew what she was asking, and I had to admit my curiosity was growing to the point where I almost hoped she was right about the basement. Almost. “Give me a sec.”

I headed for the portion of the room with stock I hadn’t finished sorting yet, which included a load of vintage clothing I picked up from an estate sale last week. Most of the clothes would go to a friend’s shop, in exchange for something nifty she had that she didn’t normally deal in, but until then...

I extracted a pair of ruby slippers of all things. They’d be too big for Brooke, but that was better than too small. When I returned and handed her the shoes, she swapped them out quickly for her own sneakers, then resumed her walking pattern.

This time, the echo—or lack of one—was more obvious with each step she took. She paced up and down the shelves, her brow creasing more with each step that sounded the same.

A twinge of disappointment echoed in my chest that she wasn’t finding anything, but it was overwritten by smugness that I was right.

“Should I grab a pair of shoes and help?” Adam offered.

Brooke shook her head. “It might get hard to hear if there are two of us.”

I glared at him.

He shrugged. “What? There could be some neat stuff down there.”

“There could be spiders and dirt down there. If there even were a *down there*,” I said.

Brooke finished surveying the section near the re-bricked portion of wall and expanded her search. Would she really cover the entire back of the shop? Would that be enough proof? It was pretty much impossible to prove something didn't exist. In this case, I suppose we could start punching holes in the floor, but that wasn't happen—

The sound of her footsteps changed, and we paused.

She tapped the floor again, and then several more times, in a widening square around one corner of a bookshelf. “We need to move this.”

“That hasn't been moved... possibly ever.” I was approaching it regardless, unable to ignore the bubble of anticipation inside. “How do you want to do this?” I looked at Adam.

He shook his head. “However doesn't get us killed.”

“Deal.” We angled ourselves, and with a combination of lifting, grunting, and pushing—like sex, but without the orgasm—managed to turn the bookcase sideways.

Holy shit. There was a latch.

3

adam

I FELT LIKE INDIANA JONES.

But without the class of students. Or the boulder chasing me. Or the Nazis.

Unless one or more of those things was behind the large wooden door we'd just lifted, to expose a staircase that vanished into the dark after about five feet.

My frustration over the failed drone flight was gone. A glance at Brooke showed wide-eyed surprise, and when I turned to Deacon, his doubt had shifted to excitement.

“Lamps,” I said. I wanted lights that would cover a broader range than flashlights.

“Utility closet. Don't go anywhere, Brooke.” Deacon walked toward said closet.

We each grabbed two large utility work-lamps and all but sprinted back to the stairwell.

“Told you so.” Brooke had recovered from her shock, but her tone was playful, rather than smug.

Deacon turned on the first lamp and shone it down the stairs. It penetrated the darkness to what might be dirt-packed

ground or stone, but not beyond. “If you’re lucky, you’ll win more than the previously mentioned spiders and dirt.”

“Like the Declaration of Independence. *Ooh*, if that’s down there, can I have it?” Hey, a guy could pretend, right?

Deacon laughed and took a tentative first step. “Only if Brooke doesn’t claim it.”

“I’d be too afraid of Nicolas Cage coming after me. You can have it.” She followed closely behind Deacon.

I took up the rear. “I’d take him, too.”

Deacon glanced back at me. “Dude. Why?”

“I’m weird. Do I need another reason... *Whoa*.” I paused halfway down, as Deacon’s light hit the first shapes which looked distinctly like sheets over furniture. Or oddly shaped ghosts. This was way better than figuring out why the drone design I’d 3D-printed didn’t fly the way I wanted it to.

We finished our descent into what might as well have been a whole different world. As long as we stayed closer to *National Treasure* than *Cabin in the Woods*, I’d be happy. “We should see how much of the room we can light with the four lamps, and then uncover things.”

Deacon set one lamp on the ground near the foot of the stairs. “I’ll go east, you go south, and we’ll meet at the fourth corner?”

“On it.” One of the things I liked about Deacon was that he understood where I was going with a lot of my ideas, without my having to explain them. Better, he didn’t call any of them *nuts* or *too out there*.

Passing so many shapes and not taking a look was killing me. With just a little more luck, the anticipation would pay off.

I reached the edge of the light and set my first lamp down. With a right turn, I headed off toward the last corner of the square, and arrived about the same time as Deacon.

His excitement reflected mine. “You still there, Brooke?” His voice echoed off brick walls and stone floors.

“Nope. Ghosts got me. *Ahh*, I’m a zombie now.” She had moved to the middle of the light and stood in a circle of sheeted chairs.

Far be it from me to correct someone, but— “Ghosts don’t turn people into Zombies.”

We joined her.

“I was right about the basement. Do you want to bet me about the ghost-zombies while I’m on a lucky streak?” she asked.

“It’s not a streak if you’ve only done it once, and no. No, I do not.” I knew to quit when I was ahead.

Deacon pointed at the nearest pieces. “Pick where you want to start, Ms. I Told You So.”

Brooke pointed. “That one.”

I had no idea if she’d picked it because it spoke to her, or if that was just the first thing her gaze fell on. I didn’t care, as long as there was something weird, cool, or what-the-fuck under the sheet.

Deacon yanked the covering away, and dust clouded the air. “I should’ve”—he coughed—“thought”—more coughing—“that through.”

As the dust settled and the chair became more than a silhouette, my jaw almost dropped.

“It’s a pope chair.” Brooke hovered her fingers over the purple velvet but didn’t make contact.

“A what?” Deacon stared at her.

I was pretty sure no pope ever sat in a chair with wrist straps on the arms and a hole in the seat. At least not that The Vatican would admit.

Brooke pointed at the seat. “Back in the day, there was a woman who tricked everyone into thinking she was a man, and she became pope. Because of that, they made a chair with a hole in the middle, so they could... uh... check a pope’s junk.”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure you’re right about at least half of what the chair is for.” I stepped closer and shone the light from my phone on the details. The intricate hand carving was beautiful. It was also a series of stylized people fucking. I gestured for her to come closer, to see.

“I— *Oh.*” Brooke stepped back, a flush on her face. “But then, what’s it...? Rather, how does it...? I don’t...”

Deacon toed a second, smaller piece into view from its spot behind the chair. It could’ve been an ottoman, but there was a wooden dick sticking out of the middle, and a handle on the side.

I nudged the handle gently with my foot, and as I turned it like a jack-in-the-box, the dildo bobbed up and down. The mechanics on this thing must be incredible. The toy looked fun too. “Dude, you have a sex chair in your basement that doesn’t exist.” If it was wrong to be torn between wanting to preserve this piece and wanting to try it out, I didn’t want to be right.

I’d been staying with Deacon since I lost my workshop and apartment in a fire two or three months ago, and I loved seeing all the weird things that came through here. But this

blew it all out of the water. Even before the sex chair, but especially now. “What else is down here?”

“Let’s find out.” Deacon turned toward the next shape, but Brooke didn’t move. “Are you all right?” When he rested a hand on her arm, she jumped and tore her gaze from the chair.

“I’m fine. Totally. I just... Why are there straps on the arms?”

I swallowed my laugh. She was serious. “Some people like being restrained when they’re being fucked.”

“Like with handcuffs. To the bed. With a partner. I understand that.” Brooke was staring at the chair again. “But...”

“The box doesn’t work by itself. It’s possible there wasn’t electricity when it was made,” Deacon said.

Brooke continued to stare. The long shadows of the dim light exaggerated the rise and fall of her chest, as her breath came out faster. She looked fascinated, rather than disgusted.

I couldn’t fathom being so naive, but I also didn’t fault her for it. Since this was an afternoon of wagers, I was willing to bet five bucks Deacon would take this opportunity to hit on her. Again.

Not that I minded watching that back and forth. I wasn’t interested in balancing a relationship along with the fucked-up-ness I was dealing with in my head, but I was still male and liked a good show. Their interactions took *slow burn* to a whole new level, and the anticipation was both entertaining and delicious to watch.

Brooke finally tore her gaze away from the seat. “We should see what else is down here. I’m not sure I could find a place for a piece like that in my living room.”

My laugh slipped out this time. “Was that a consideration?”

“It is if I get first pick of what’s down here.” She’d shaken off her fixation.

It was a good thing I’d only bet myself.

Deacon moved on to a longer, shorter sheet-covered piece next. He was more careful unveiling it, which kept the dust to a minimum. The furniture underneath was almost a fainting couch, but the seat flowed up in a gentle curve, instead of being flat. Almost the perfect shape for twisting someone into all sorts of interesting, furniture-assisted fucking positions.

Deacon spent a few minutes examining it, and determined it was probably as old as it looked, and in excellent condition, considering it had been hidden away down here for who knew how long.

We moved on to other pieces, trying to follow some sort of line toward the end of the light. Most of them were like the fainting couch—possibly benign, but possibly with other purposes. Like the benches that weren’t the right height, width, or shape for sitting or resting one’s feet on.

“We’ll be here all night if we keep doing big reveals on these things,” Deacon said. “Everybody grab a sheet.”

We did. I uncovered a chair. Not a sexy mysterious one with straps or a hole in the middle. As far as I could tell, it was just a wooden chair. It didn’t look very comfortable, so maybe if pain was someone’s kink...

Which it was for me, and I still wouldn’t sit there. Really it was just a chair.

Deacon uncovered a wooden chest. That would be fun to take a peek inside.

But Brooke scored. She was standing in front of a wooden slab almost as tall as her but tilted at an angle. There were definitely straps on this one, and the gear system on the bottom made it look like both angle of board and strap position were adjustable. And there was a hole right about where the face would go if one were leaned against it on their chest.

“Holy shit. It’s a Berkley horse.” The awe in Deacon’s voice matched my excitement.

I didn’t know the term. “A what, now?”

“I’m so glad I’m not the only one who doesn’t understand,” Brooke said.

I was pretty sure I understood the device, just not what Deacon called it.

“Allow me to explain and demonstrate.” Deacon reached for Brooke’s hand. “Early 1800’s, there was this dominatrix named Theresa Berkley who needed a device that made torture more fun.”

He coaxed her to lean forward, her face where it belonged.

“So it’s not like an ancient massage chair?” Brooke’s laugh was nervous, and her voice husky.

“Not quite.” Deacon pressed close behind her, to slide his hands along her arms, raising them as he moved. “Wrists are restrained here.” He didn’t strap her in, but she stayed in position when he pulled away. He wedged her feet apart with his. “Ankles are bound as well, and bottoms come down.”

He didn’t back away, and she didn’t move. Anticipation thickened in the air, as I watched them emit enough sparks to light this entire area. How was this so infuriatingly hot?

“And then the spanking commences.” Deacon slapped one of his hands with the other, sending a loud *clap* echoing through the basement.

Brooke’s whimper made me instantly hard.

Deacon leaned closer to her until his mouth was near her ear. “And that’s how that works.”

Was it hot in here, or was it the two of them? Did they remember I was here? Should I say something? Leave quietly and hope Deacon had details later that he was willing to share? Fade quietly into the shadows and see what happened next?

“If you’d like a hands-on demonstration, I can give you one.” Deacon’s voice was low, with an underlying growl.

Pick me. I wasn’t sure if I wanted that or to keep watching.

“I might need—” The opening bars of *7 Rings* filled the room, cutting Brooke off and shattering the mood. “It’s Paige.” She strained, which sent her straight into Deacon, who caught her with his hands on her hips.

And they were frozen in time again.

Just fuck already.

The song stopped, and the silence was as deafening as the music had been.

“I need to call her back.” Brooke stepped away, extracting her phone as she walked.

“*Fuck,*” Deacon muttered.

I knew what he meant. “Come back tomorrow with real lighting and finish exploring?”

“Good idea.”

“Dude. You have a full-blown actual dungeon in your basement.”

Deacon gave a brief shake of his head and turned to me. “Awesome, right? Think I could introduce her to more of the pieces?”

At least his mind was in the same place as mine. “Signs don’t point to *no*.”

“I’m sorry. I need to go.” Brooke called from the stairs before she scurried up.

“*Fuck*.” Deacon slumped back against the Berkley horse. “As long as she comes back tomorrow.”

Maybe watching this slow burn wasn’t as much fun as I thought.

brooke

IT WAS CHILLY OUTSIDE, but the heat from my encounter with Deacon kept me warm from the inside as I drove home to deal with my teenage daughter's latest crisis.

I typically brushed off Deacon's flirting as him being him, but today... I couldn't get how close he'd been out of my head. Was I really going to take him up on his offer for *dating instructions*? It was tempting in a way few things were, even without the details of what he had in mind.

But first, I'd deal with Paige's woes. She'd called me in tears. Their high school Sweethearts' Dance was girl's choice, and a lot of the girls in her school went all out with their *asks*. She preferred not to draw much attention to herself, but she'd put some effort and creativity into the invitation for the guy she wanted to go with.

He'd said *no*.

While she was telling me her story between sobs, I could hear her twin brother, Bryan, in the background. He'd offered to string the guy up for being an idiot.

The two of them were growing up so fast. I swore they were babies just yesterday, and now...

I'd made it clear that they could live at home as long as they needed. There would be no kicking them out at graduation or on their eighteenth birthday, but Paige planned to move out of state and while Bryan wanted to stay here, I doubted he'd be living at home much longer.

The looming empty nest made me both sad and proud. It was also part of the reason I'd decided I could start dating again. I was losing one of my last excuses. Like I'd told Deacon and Adam, though, exploring the whole *dating* thing was daunting. Almost terrifying.

The instant I let myself think of them, the images from the basement rushed back. As did the—*ahem*—unique furniture we'd found.

As I pulled into my driveway, I shrugged off the memories. We lived in a restored farmhouse that had been built around the beginning of the last century. There was an old barn on the back of the lot, and a newer one closer to the house. The new one was where I did my sculpting, and the old one was off-limits.

I'd given the rundown place a glance when we moved in, more than ten years ago, to find an old tractor under a tarp, and a lot of spiders.

I headed inside through the kitchen door and found Paige sitting at the table, her eyes still puffy and red.

Bryan was holding out an ice-cream sandwich at arm's length. "It's chocolate and sugar. It'll make you feel better."

"I don't want to feel better." Paige's voice was rough. A piece of poster board sat on the table in front of her, with words written in a flowing script, and candy bars stuck in strategic places to provide missing words. The giant card was

her *go to the dance with me* invitation. She was halfway through a Snicker's bar, crumpled Sugar Daddy and Uno wrappers discarded next to her elbow.

I took the seat across from her at the table. How was I supposed to tell her this wasn't the end of the world? That she'd find another date, and probably several more, before she finally found *the one*. That wasn't reassuring to someone who'd been turned down by their crush.

I covered her hand. "I'm sorry, hon."

"If you keep eating chocolate, you'll get sick and puke," Bryan said.

She glared at him. "You *just* offered me sugar and chocolate. Besides, maybe I want to puke. The entire cafeteria saw. I'm so freaking humiliated."

"You should puke on his shoes. That'd serve him right." Bryan was in top form this afternoon.

I'd correct him, but the two of them had always had an almost symbiotic bond, and odds were high he was saying exactly what Paige needed to hear, to feel better. "Put the ice-cream sandwich in the freezer or eat it. Your sister already told you *no*."

Bryan shrugged and unwrapped the treat. He shoved the entire thing in his mouth at once.

Boys. I mentally rolled my eyes.

"You're so gross." Paige's words were a sharp contrast to her smile.

"Sure you don't want one?" Bryan asked through a mouth full of chocolate cookie and vanilla ice cream.

Paige made a gagging noise. "*Ugh. So gross.*"

“Not as gross as Jason the Idiotic. Please let me go beat him up?”

I wasn't sure they needed me for this, but I did have to do at least a little parenting. “Aggravated assault is a felony, and you're old enough to be tried as an adult. Is he worth the jail time?”

My twins said *no* in unison.

“What do you want to do instead?” I gave them this choice any time they had a problem. “Comfort or solutions?”

Paige slouched in her seat. “I don't know.”

Which meant she wasn't receptive to solutions. “Movies and pizza?”

“Can we watch the kind of movies where they fall in love and then one of them dies?” she asked.

Bryan wrinkled his nose. “Dark.”

“When your heart gets broken, you can pick the movie. Go order pizza.” I trusted him to get the details right. There were only two pizza places in our small town—a big chain and a local place. We loved the small pizzeria, but they didn't have things like online ordering.

A short while later, we were settled in the living room, first movie up, and pizza on the coffee table between the three of us. Two movies later, Paige was smiling and acting like herself again. She decided she didn't need a date for a stupid dance, and she was going with a friend, to make a statement.

I sent them off to finish their homework before bed, and set to work tidying up the house. Putting dishes in the dishwasher. Sweeping the kitchen floor. As I pushed a chair

into its spot under the table, memories of a very different kind of seat flashed in my mind.

The kind we'd discovered in Deacon's hidden basement.

Heat and desire flooded me, pulsing between my legs. It wasn't that I was sex averse. But, I'd only ever been with one man, and for a long time I hadn't been able to imagine being with anyone else. I was open to exploring, but so much of what was out there was overwhelming.

Deacon could teach me.

Except I couldn't picture sex without love, and I knew he was fine with such a thing. I could do sex before marriage, but not a casual *this doesn't mean anything*. I needed a connection. I already had an emotional bond with Deacon. What if something like this afternoon went further, and I took it seriously and he didn't?

I was getting *way* ahead of myself. He'd offered to teach me the ropes of modern dating, not how to screw.

Still, it felt so good to have him pressed against me, his heat at my back, and what I was pretty sure was his erection digging into my behind.

The memory refused to be pushed aside as easily as a few hours ago. It was bedtime, anyway. *Me* time. I had a list of steamy romance books I turned to, when I needed a little extra inspiration. It had taken me years to work up the courage to buy a little vibrator, and even then, it wasn't until I was certain I could order something discreetly online and be the one to pick up the package when it arrived at the house.

I locked my bedroom door, changed into loose clothing, and settled into bed with my eReader. Which book did I want to reread tonight? I was fine with the kissing and slow

seduction, as long as it led to the flowery language and the hero's engorged shaft gliding into the heroine's glistening cave.

Nothing caught my eye—none of the old or new titles. Why didn't I have anything with spanking? The sound Deacon made during his history lesson earlier, the *crack* of skin on skin... I swore I could feel that smack on my bare butt.

Carly, a new friend I'd met through my basically sister-in-law, Daria, had given me a list of *gateway* books. She read a lot while she traveled, and she'd said these were titles for when I was ready to be eased into something more intense.

I'd avoided them up until now, not having any idea where to start. This seemed like a good time to find something with spanking in it. I landed on a title Carly said was mostly fun smut with very little plot, and started reading.

The book opened with an open-palmed hand striking a naked ass, and my pulse roared in my ears. I was glued to my screen, as the hero smacked one of the heroine's cheeks and then the other, back and forth, pausing occasionally to dip his fingers between her legs and spread her juices from opening to sex and back again.

Dampness pooled between my thighs. In my head, the hero looked a hell of a lot like Deacon.

Oh my... The people in the story weren't alone. A third person watched. And in my mind, he was Adam.

Was that wicked of me? I'd never pictured real people in place of book characters before, but now I couldn't stop. I was the heroine, bent over Deacon's knee, bare butt in the air and growing redder with each strike.

And the shadowy figure watched us, his arousal obvious as he stroked.

My entire body was lit up like a Christmas tree. I set the book aside and slipped my hand under my panties. My fingers were instantly wet and slick.

I closed my eyes and leaned into my pillow, letting the modified book images play out in my mind. Picturing Deacon paddling then fingering me.

I stroked myself, murmuring silent pleas for an invisible helper to give me more. Push me harder. Begging in a whisper to please let me find release.

Orgasm washed over me, and I shivered under my own touch. I kept teasing until I was spent, and collapsed on the bed with a satisfied sigh.

I held onto the pleasant glow as long as I could, but it slowly slipped away, letting reality back in. Had I just imagined myself with two men? Who I knew?

I understood that people had poly relationships. I was finally wrapping my brain around Colin's. But it wasn't for me, and neither was this raunchy sex. Not in real life.

That didn't mean I had to give up the fantasies or let go of the daydream of Deacon spanking me while Adam watched.

I cleaned up, then sent Carly a text asking for more recommendations like the one I'd just read. Books plus my imagination were more than enough.

I wasn't prepared for anything else.

5

deacon

I WAS AWAKE FAR EARLIER than was sane, if the six followed by other numbers on my clock was to be believed. Not that I'd slept much. My waking mind raced between the discovery in the basement and introducing Brooke to more of it, and when I did fall asleep, the thoughts intensified and became surreal.

The smell of fresh coffee greeted me as I climbed from bed. An upside to having Adam here—he was one of those unholy abominations who thought this was a normal time to be awake. There was almost always coffee waiting when I woke up.

I stumbled into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

Adam barely glanced up from his tablet and whatever he was doing with the pencil. He liked his thinking time in the mornings, and since I was rarely coherent before eight, I was happy to give it to him.

I grabbed my coffee, black and hot and strong enough to get me off, and sat down across from him at the kitchen table.

Neither of us talked while I downed the first cup of liquid salvation faster than I should.

“Brandon will be here in about an hour.” Adam never looked up from his work, as I went back to the pot for a second cup of coffee.

“Sounds good.”

We’d wanted to keep exploring the basement last night, but with only the four lights, it was difficult. Adam’s brother knew someone who had a lot of lighting equipment for cameras. Brandon had offered to bring everything over this morning, as long as we were kind to the equipment and let him see what we’d found.

“Put your balls away before then.” Adam’s delivery was flat, his eyes glued on his screen

I looked down and snorted in disbelief at the sight of my dick hanging out of my boxers. The coffee might need to be stronger. “Fine. I guess.” My sigh was exaggerated. I adjusted myself and leaned against the nearby counter.

“Should I be grateful you weren’t dreaming about Brooke?” Adam finally gave me his attention.

I quirked my lips. “Or disappointed you didn’t get to see the results.”

Adam and I met online a few years ago, when his then-girlfriend decided she wanted a threesome. He and I hit it off, but she was disappointed her bisexual boyfriend was making out with another man as much as he was with her.

That night soured their relationship, and a few months later, when his father passed away, she decided she didn’t want to deal with his grief.

He was better off without her in his life.

Adam and I had stayed good friends, with occasional benefits, but we made far better friends than anything else. Neither one of us was the long-term-romance kind of guy.

He was the ultimate wingman, though.

“I’m disappointed I didn’t get to see the results last night,” Adam teased.

“You and me both.”

“Do you want me to say it?”

To tell me, *again*, that I either needed to make a move for her or away from her? “No.”

He shrugged.

“Brooke’s not the kind of person either of us usually hooks up with. You heard her yesterday—modern dating is a little weird—plus you saw how bright red she got with that chair. With anything sexual.”

“Which you rarely fail to exploit.”

I stared at Adam. “Your point is?”

“It’s a bit elementary school. If you want to pull the pretty girl’s pigtails to tell her you like her, maybe follow it up by asking if you can fuck her at the same time.”

I sank in my chair and let out a long breath. “I know.” I couldn’t say why I kept fixating on Brooke. The challenge? Maybe. Or because she was different. Sweet. Smart. Sassy.

“Shit or get off the pot,” Adam said.

I wrinkled my nose. “You couldn’t have used a better phrase when it comes to sex?”

“I probably could’ve. Your reaction wouldn’t have been as fun.” He grinned and pushed back from the table. “I’m

heading downstairs, to make sure we're set for Brandon. Come find me when you have pants on."

I hated to admit that Adam was right, mostly because that meant admitting I was wrong, but what was I doing with Brooke? Last night, pressed close to her back, hearing the soft whimpers and sighs she made with me barely touching her, and I'd been rock hard.

But a woman like Brooke wanted—deserved—*long term*. Only one partner. Ever? I couldn't fathom. Pursuing my attraction to her would be about lust for me, and when it ended, I guaranteed she wouldn't want to stay friends, the way Adam had.

So, no. I might keep flirting, I was who I was, and I'd definitely help her navigate the dating world if she was serious about taking me up on my offer, but I wouldn't sleep with her. No matter how tempting the idea was.

I shook aside the thoughts, showered, and dressed so I could head downstairs.

Brandon was here, unloading lights from his SUV with Adam's help. Watching them together over the last few months had been uncomfortable. When the fire happened at Adam's, he originally went to his brother's, but their relationship was already fragile, and a blow-out of a fight had broken a fractured bond.

Apologies had been made, and the two were working to repair years of pain, but frequently they didn't say much when they were in the same space. Like now. It was still better than when they refused to see each other, though. That had hurt Adam more than he'd admitted.

As soon as Adam saw me, he grinned. “I thought you’d like to be here for any sharing or big reveals.”

“It’s more furniture, isn’t it?” Brandon asked. “How big a reveal is it?”

I pointed to two boxes of lights and grabbed a couple of portable screens. “Follow me and decide for yourself.” We trooped down the stairs, and I set my load aside and turned on the closest lamp we left down last night.

“Is that...” Brandon stared at the seatless chair, mouth slightly open.

“A *pope chair*.” Adam repeated Brooke’s response, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Brandon turned his stunned look on his brother. “You can’t actually think that.”

“He doesn’t.” I laughed. “We’ve only uncovered a few pieces so far, but...” I walked toward the next stopping point, shining a light on the various benches. I’d done a bit of research last night, in between fits of trying and failing to sleep, and confirmed that these were used for bending people over in various positions.

“*Fuck me*,” Brandon muttered.

I snorted. “Pretty sure that was the point, yes.”

He shook his head. “I need one of these. Talk about an amazing Valentine’s Day gift.”

“I don’t want to hear about that.” Adam stuck his fingers in his ears. “La, la, la, la, la.”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “Like you’re so sweet and innocent.”

“I’m not. But that doesn’t mean I want to picture you using one of those benches.”

“I wouldn’t be the one *on* it,” Brandon said.

“*La la la la la,*” Adam sang louder.

Absolutely ridiculous. Maybe these two were getting along better than I’d realized. “I need to make sure none of them are part of a set, but you’re welcome to one if you want it,” I told Brandon.

“Perfect. I’ll pick it up with the lights.”

I didn’t expect him to ask for a price or let me give him one of the benches. He insisted I treat him like any paying customer, and he had a bigger budget than I did. But I would knock off something for him bringing us the lights, and just not mention it.

Once his SUV was unloaded, Brandon had to run, to make an appointment. Adam and I spent the rest of the morning setting up enough lights to get a good view of the entire basement. The space was larger than my shop, extending under Aubrey’s clothing shop next door.

With more light, Adam started recording as we uncovered and sifted through everything else. The furniture down here wasn’t tightly packed into the space. In fact, depending on how we positioned things, it was about enough to furnish this basement.

And most of it was similar to what we’d already found—benches, chaises, wicked chairs, bed frames, and a few sets of stocks—long wooden boards with holes in them for heads and wrists, meant to restrain and publicly humiliate.

Realization tickled my thoughts, but my brain was snagged on the refusal to put all these pieces into the picture they made.

Against the far wall, we found a series of silk privacy screens with delicate, gorgeous, and blatantly pornographic artwork on them. There were several chests and wooden wardrobes next to the screens, as well. Inside, we found corsets, garters, ruffled skirts, and high heels.

Aubrey was going to love this shit.

And I was picturing Brooke in the white corset with red trim, and nothing underneath it, maybe strapped to one of the crosses—

“Dude, I think there was a sex dungeon in your basement.” Adam’s comment forced me to admit what I’d been trying to ignore since we came down here.

Because— “My family built this place. My great-times-four grandfather and grandmother. No one else has owned it but my family.” And if Adam didn’t want to admit his brother had sex, I *really* didn’t want to imagine my grandparents holding paid orgies in their basement. Besides, no one had ever mentioned it. Not my family, not the history books. I’d never even heard rumors. “I’d know if there used to be a secret brothel down here.”

“Would you?” There was a challenge in Adam’s retort. “Because yesterday you didn’t even know you had a basement.”

He had a good point.

6

adam

THIS PLACE WAS SO MUCH BETTER than a cave with a gilded egg or the Arc of the Covenant or the Holy Grail.

Maybe not that last one. Eternal life would be a lot of fun, especially with access to all this equipment.

Deacon and I spent several hours cataloging, with him making notes and me taking pictures and video. When I lost my workshop late last year, I'd lost a part of me as well. Nothing in there had been irreplaceable, for the right price, but the venture had felt like *the* idea. The one I could stick to. The one that would finally give me direction.

I still had a lot of ideas—it was who I was—but none of them grabbed me now.

Since last night, that inspiration was back. Sure, this was Deacon's stuff, his find, but it sent my imagination racing over the possibilities. Were exploration-heist-porn movies a thing? No, *porn* was the wrong word for it, because I wanted this movie to have a plot but also have scorching sex.

Like that movie with Deadpool and Black Adam and Wonder Woman, but they all fuck at the end. And in the middle. And the beginning—

“Anyone home?” Aubrey’s voice carried through the room.

“Back here,” Deacon called.

I raised my brows. “*Back here* is not a direction.”

“No, but I can follow the sound of your voices.” Aubrey joined us.

“Unless there are echoes and ghosts, trying to misdirect you.”

She looked at me with her mouth twisted, and poked me in the arm. “You don’t feel like a ghost.”

“I’ve taken a corporeal form, specifically to haunt this realm.” I liked Aubrey. She and Deacon had been friends since they were kids, and she usually had a similar sense of humor to his.

They were more like siblings than friends, with the frequent friendly spats and zero sexual tension between them. Aubrey might as well be Deacon’s sister.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re such a dork. A vampire would’ve made far more sense and taken fewer mental acrobatics to justify.”

“A vampire who hid in a basement for more than a hundred and fifty years and never fed?” Deacon’s question was heavy with disbelief.

“Uh... *yeah*. He was hibernating. Or mourning, like Lesta — Are we under my shop?”

Deacon looked at her and then up. “Pretty sure.”

“*Wow*. I came over to pick up that box of clothes, and Dylan said you’d found a door. I had to come see for myself,

but this is way cooler than I expected.” As she talked, she cast her gaze around the room. “Holy... Are those...?”

“Corsets and skirts and stuff,” I said to her retreating back.

We followed her to one of the open trunks.

“*And stuff...*” The fact that she was muttering didn’t hide her disgust at his phrasing. She held up one of the corsets. “Handmade. Real silk. Actual boning—”

My snicker slipped out, and she glared at me.

“Not that kind of boning,” she said.

Deacon snorted. “He knows. And you said it again.”

“*Boys.*” She grabbed the flashlight Deacon was carrying and shone it on the details of the clothing. “This is fucking incredible. You’re going to let me put these up on consignment for you, right?”

“As soon as Brooke has a chance to look at it all,” Deacon said.

Aubrey’s irritation and disbelief turned genuine, all traces of humor vanishing, but her half-smirk returned so fast I must have imagined otherwise. “Is she going to encase one of them in lead? Because I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Brooke’s expertise is not vintage clothing.”

“She bet me I had a basement, and I was sure she was wrong. As you can see...” Deacon swept an arm around the room. “She gets to pick from what we find.”

“I suppose that’s fair. As soon as you’re ready, I’ll help you price the clothing out and put it on display.” Aubrey glided her hand over a skirt, never making contact.

Footsteps echoed on the stairs, like work boots on wood, and Brooke's *hello* reached us.

"I need to get back to work." Aubrey stepped away. "Let me know on the stuff."

"I thought it wasn't *stuff*," Deacon called as she strolled away.

She flipped him off over her shoulder.

Yup. Total siblings.

Brooke turned to watch her leave, then joined us. "Was it something I said?"

The question struck me as odd for reasons I couldn't quite place. "She had things to do."

"I was worried you might not be back after everything we found yesterday." Deacon's tone was light and playful, but I heard the seriousness underneath. Did he have any idea how bad he had it for her?

And how did she not?

"I would've been here sooner, to see what else you found, but Mom life called," Brooke said. "Impressive haul. Laura Croft would be envious."

That was what I was talking about.

"Oh, *wow*." Brooke wandered past us and stopped in front of one of the wardrobes. The way she tilted her head, rather than opening the doors, she probably wasn't looking to see if it went to Narnia.

Sexy, explicit Narnia. *Fillory*.

"Those are amazing." She pointed to the decoration on the top.

I shone a light up to get a better look. It was an intricately detailed arch. “It’s people fucking.”

Pink colored Brooke’s cheeks. “But the design work is incredible.”

“I won’t argue that,” Deacon said. “Do you want to look around at everything before you pick your prize, or have you already seen what you want?” His tone slid down half an octave.

Brooke glanced at us, bottom lip caught between her teeth, then turned away. “I’m not taking anything.”

“But you won. Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to admit I was wrong?” Deacon asked.

She shook her head. “We went looking because we’re trying to save your business. I can’t take away from what may be the solution. No arguments.”

“Did you just use your *Mom voice* on us?” I laughed.

Brooke pursed her lips. “Never.” She almost sounded offended. “But I will help Deacon restore anything like that”—she nodded at the arch—“that you find down here.”

“Do you want any more explanations of positions or furniture use to go with your work?” Deacon asked.

“It might be helpful. I need to make sure my restorations do the originals justice.”

Frustration surged in from nowhere. I wasn’t in the mood to watch the verbal version of blue balls tonight. Which was weird—it never bothered me before. Maybe if I fucked off to do my own thing, these two would get their fuck on already.

After all, there was a sex dungeon in Deacon’s basement, so weirder things had happened.

No. Never mind. Deacon and Brooke finally moving past this, whatever it was, was weirder than secret underground fuck-benches.

“I’m going to go edit this video and turn it into something,” I said. “Several somethings. You’re cool with me uploading all of it?”

Deacon nodded. “Mention the shop if you can.”

“Always.” I’d be hurt he thought he had to ask, but given the way he was looking at Brooke, this wasn’t about me, anyway.

I left the two of them to do what they weren’t going to do, and headed back upstairs. Ideas spilled through my mind about the best way to spin this find. I had a YouTube channel that changed focus as often as my brain did. Not a lot of subscribers, but I had fun making the videos.

The contents of Deacon’s basement could be an entire series, though.

A giggle drifted up from below, and I cringed. Why was this rubbing me so wrong?

I should’ve filmed the search for the hidden trap door yesterday, but I could at least get shots of everywhere we looked. I wandered through the back of Deacon’s shop, filming the same path we’d followed when we were exploring. The series could focus on aspects of the journey, mixed with the different types of things we’d uncovered, and finish by pointing people to Deacon’s and Aubrey’s places, since she’d have the clothing we found.

It was awfully quiet down there. Which it should be. I wasn’t close enough to hear the conversation, and there was absolutely no reason for me to holler *everything okay?*

Nope. I was going to work on my videos, revel in the excitement of this discovery, and get over this bothered feeling about the exchange between Deacon and Brooke this afternoon.

brooke

DESPITE MY QUALITY alone-time last night, thoughts of Deacon's place hadn't left me alone all day. Of what we'd found in his basement and that he seemed to know exactly what it was all for and how to use it.

We spent a few hours going through everything he and Adam had uncovered, and I made mental notes about what I could do restoration on, what I could add new details to, replace pieces of, and more. And every other piece, Deacon had a comment about purpose, or demonstrations of use, or something equally enticing that had my pulse hammering in my ears.

I reached a point where my skin wasn't cooling and the throb between my thighs was impossible to ignore. I was used to a direct, teasing Deacon, but this was a whole new level of temptingly explicit.

"How do you do it?" My question slipped out before I could decipher what I meant.

He looked at me, puzzled. "Do what?"

"Treat sex like it's no big deal." That wasn't quite what I wanted to know, but it was close.

"You misunderstand."

“Help me get it, then.”

Deacon grasped my fingertips and pulled me toward some normal chairs on the other end of the basement from the stairs. He nudged me into one and sat across from me. “It’s not that it’s no big deal, but when you take the emotional attachment out of it, sex can be really incredible or just plain funny. Think about it. It’s sticky. It’s messy. People do the most ridiculous things to get it.”

I’d never thought about any of that. To me, sex was this thing people in love did that felt good. “I am so screwed when it comes to dating. But not, because I don’t get any of this. I feel like a freaking forty-year-old virgin.”

“My experiences are different than yours—it doesn’t make yours bad, only different. You’re in a small town in Utah, and you’re far more likely to find people with your experiences than mine. You can find—”

“A nice Mormon divorcé or widower who’s only ever been with one woman and wants me to be his second wife, so he can parade me in front of the congregation?” *No, thank you.* “Would you want that?”

“I see your point.” Deacon smiled through his scowl. “Though if said widower were parading me in front of the other people at church, I’d be highly amused.” And there he went, making a joke of things again.

“It’s not that I want to go out and screw around, but there has to be a middle ground between celibacy and doing everyone.” Did I imply... “Not that you are. I didn’t mean that.”

Deacon didn’t look bothered. “There is a middle ground. You just have to find it.”

“How?” Why was I pursuing this conversation here and now? Because letting the questions bounce in my head wasn’t helping, and he wasn’t shutting me down. And part of me wanted to see what kind of *lessons* he could give me. A large part of me. “Can people really enjoy sex without being emotionally attached?” I asked.

His eyes grew wide, reflecting my surprise at what I’d said aloud.

“Adam and I do,” he said.

“But you’re together.” They had to be. They were so close.

“No. Rather, we’re friends, but we’re not more.”

I didn’t get this at all, but I wanted to. “That means, when there’s sex, there’s emotional attachment, because you’re friends. How do you keep the line from blurring? I don’t want to be the woman who throws all reason to the wind because a guy is a good kisser.” I was really baring my soul today. How did Deacon bring that out in me?

“If you don’t want that, don’t be that woman.”

I gave him a withering look. “Like it’s that simple.”

Deacon huffed a sigh. “I realize it’s not, but the theory is solid. What I’m going to tell you next will sound deceptively simple but complex at the same time. If you don’t want to confuse an emotional relationship with a physical one, look at the two separately.”

“This was a mistake.” I was an idiot for thinking I could talk to him about this.

When I stood to leave, he grabbed my wrist and a fresh shock of heat spilled through me.

“I’m not done.” His voice was as firm as his grip, and he stood to look me in the eye.

I swallowed past my suddenly dry throat. “Okay...?”

“What you and I are doing right now—is it romantic?”

Was it? I knew better. It was turning me on more than I expected, though. “No.”

Deacon rested a hand on my cheek, scorching my skin. “Focus on my touch.” His voice was low and even, sliding over me like satin. “Don’t think about what your heart is saying but pay attention to how your body feels.”

“Okay.” Like I had a choice but to listen to my body. My racing heart. The anticipation coiled in my belly. The way my breath wanted to tear from my chest in short pants. “I think I get it.” My voice wavered.

One corner of his mouth tugged up. “You sure?”

Not even close. If he hadn’t led with the whole *don’t think about your heart*, I’d be tumbling into a myriad of questions about whether this meant anything. That didn’t mean I wanted him to stop. “I might need a little more explanation and practice.”

“As you wish.” Deacon brushed his lips lightly over mine, and the rest of the world fell away. He glided his mouth along my jaw, up to my ear. “See? Just the physical.” His hot breath teased my skin with the whisper.

I wanted to whimper. This was just a kiss. It didn’t mean more. I repeated the words in my head while the faint tingle of his lips lingered everywhere he’d kissed. “I think I get it.” In theory, I did. In practice, maybe not, because I wanted him to keep going.

“You’re sure?” Deacon pulled back to search my face, but didn’t drop his hand. “You don’t want more practice?”

I so very much did. “Like what?” My question came out breathy.

“You want to be prepared for anything dating throws your way. If the opportunity comes up, you want to seize it, don’t you?”

As opposed to holding back out of terror or lack of experience? “Yes.” I wasn’t going to become someone else when it came to certain behaviors, but I’d hate to miss out on a great guy because sex terrified me.

“In that case...” Deacon trailed a finger down the middle of my chest, stopping to tug on my waistband and pull me closer. “How about a full-on, hands-on lesson?”

“Yes, please.” I didn’t mean to say that out loud.

Deacon’s deep chuckle told me it was the right answer. He nipped at my earlobe and kissed along the shell of my ear. “You just have to remember two things,” he whispered. “This is about the physical, not about love. And if you’re not enjoying it, you tell me to stop. Can you do that?”

I nodded, unable to find my voice.

He dragged his thumb over my bottom lip. “Good girl.”

I practically melted into a puddle at his feet.

Deacon dropped his hands to my hips and guided me backwards until my calves hit something. He lowered me onto one of the fainting couches and sat facing me.

We were still in his basement. The shop was probably closed by now, but Adam was likely around.

“What if someone walks in on us?” I asked.

“They won’t.” He rested a palm on my waist, under my shirt.

“But what if they do?”

He glided his palm to my stomach and inched higher. “They can watch.”

Holy heck, why did that make me slick with anticipation?

“Unless you want to stop.” Deacon’s touch stalled.

I doubted Adam would come looking for us, but the idea of him, standing in the shadows watching... *Oh my*. “No. I don’t want to stop.”

Deacon’s hot, calloused palm against my skin was a new kind of anticipation, as he kept his touch to my stomach and breastbone. He crushed his mouth to mine with a hard abandon that hadn’t been there before, and I kissed back. Our tongues tangled in a frantic dance. How was he making me feel this good with such simple sensations?

Deacon glided his lips down my neck, pausing to suck on the skin, before traveling lower to nip at my collarbone.

This was like in the books I read, but so much better and a lot more explicit in real life. I wanted to touch back, but I wasn’t sure where or how. I ran my fingertips tentatively along his inner thigh, up to the distinct bulge, and lightly traced the outline of his erection.

He sucked a sharp breath through his teeth and let out a groan that was as yummy as his touch. “What are you doing?” His voice was raw.

“This can’t be one-sided. I want to touch too.”

His hands fell away from me in a blink, but he grabbed my wrists before I could register disappointment. The way his fingers dug into me made me think of a barely controlled beast.

Hot.

“I’d hate to overload you with instructions.” His tone was still low and measured.

I was already on overload. “I have to learn, eventually.”

“You can’t shove everything into your brain at once. Save some of it for the next lesson.”

“You assume there’s going to be a Lesson Two.” I suspected my teasing was playing with fire, but I couldn’t help myself.

He smirked. “There’s a lot to learn. This is more than just sex.”

“But the point is that it is *just sex*.”

“Exactly.”

“So confusing,” I said playfully. “Make me want a Lesson Two.”

His grin was as threatening and enticing as his growl. “You will.”

“What are you going to do if I touch you anyway?” I couldn’t help it. This was fun.

“I’ll restrain you.”

I liked the sound of that. What had he unleashed in me? I twisted free of Deacon’s grip and dragged a finger down his chest.

He snatched a silk scarf from the top of a nearby clothing pile, wrapped it around my wrists, and pinned them above my head. I tilted to watch him tie me to a chair that was butted against the couch behind me. “Resourceful.”

“You have no idea.” He was rough when he shoved my shirt up, as if he’d shed a veneer of calm. The elastic from my bra left a burn in its wake when he shoved it out of the way.

My heart was in my throat. Was I really doing this? Decades of expectation and indoctrination and other people’s opinions surged in around me.

Deacon pulled away to look me in the eye. “Are you all right?”

I wanted to do this with someone, to adapt and adjust and figure out how it worked, and I couldn’t think of anyone better than him. “Yes.”

“Good.” His grin had returned. He dipped his head and wrapped his lips around one of my nipples. As he licked and sucked, he kneaded the other. The intensity made my head swim, and he kept the attention up until I was squirming underneath him.

Could I get off this way? Because I swore I was close.

Deacon moved his mouth back to mine. “Still staying removed? Focused on how your body feels?”

I couldn’t think about anything *but* how my body felt. “Yes.”

“Good.” He swallowed my moan with another series of kisses, as he glided a hand down to undo my jeans. He slipped under my panties.

I gasped when he slid between my legs, along my slick skin. It felt so very different to have his hands down there than my own. His fingers were pressed tight against my skin, sandwiched between me and my clothing, but somehow he managed to slip them inside me.

I bucked into the penetration, thrusting against his hand as he pumped. When he withdrew, he moved up to the throbbing button I knew would get me off.

Deacon teased until I was panting. Nothing existed except us, in this moment. Climax built inside, and when it washed over me, I had to bite my cheek to keep from crying out.

He eased his touch away as I shuddered with pleasure, then flicked his tongue over his glistening fingers.

My heart hammered at the sight. I'd never... "What do I taste like?"

"Find out for yourself." He leaned forward and pressed his fingers to my lips. And then he was kissing me and licking me from his skin and letting me lick him clean.

This was incredible.

When he straightened and said, "I'm going to get something to clean you up with. Don't move," I was surprised.

"We're not done," I said.

"You enjoyed yourself, didn't you?"

"But you didn't..."

"I promise you, I did. Besides, Lesson Two."

As soon as my brain power returned, I'd be daydreaming about what that involved.

8

deacon

I DIDN'T WANT to send Brooke home, but the compulsion to keep her here, to fuck her all night and into the morning felt dangerous. With her lack of experience, I needed to find that line between tasting her and making sure I didn't destroy our friendship. Ensuring I didn't hurt her.

When I got up in the morning, I grabbed my phone. There was a text from Aubrey that read, *What did you do?*

No way was she talking about Brooke and me. *What are you talking about?* I sent back.

When the message sat on *Unread* for more than a few seconds, I got tired of waiting for an answer.

I wandered into the bathroom and stripped out of my clothes. My half-hard cock gave a half-hearted salute. I was pretty sure the poor guy had been in this state most of the night. What would've happened if I hadn't stopped with Brooke? Stripped her out of her clothes, slid inside her, and taken her while she was bound to that couch?

And now I was fully erect. I scrubbed my face and stepped under still-cold water in the shower. The icy spray was a shock to my system, but it didn't clear out the teasing thoughts.

My imagination picked up where I'd left off with Brooke. Instead of me sending her home after the orgasm, her clothes came off and so did mine.

I fisted my cock as I pictured myself buried inside her, and in my fantasy, Adam emerged from the shadows.

This was nice. Especially since he had his dick out.

It was easy to lose myself in imagining how good Brooke felt wrapped around me. Of being watched. This time, when Brooke came, she was loud. She let out an incredible scream of pleasure that rocketed through me and tugged at my mounting need.

One of the incredible things about a fantasy was no condoms required. I spilled inside her, pumping until I was spent.

When imaginary-Adam approached, I slid to the floor on my knees and took him in my mouth, sucking until he finished in my mouth.

In real life, need tightened in my balls, pressure building with anticipation. My legs wobbled when I came. A sticky mess splashed on the wall and coated my hand, and I kept pumping until it was too much.

I needed either Brooke or Adam here. Or both.

Or neither. Last night was just sex. Hell, it wasn't even that. It was an orgasm for Brooke, and if my hand was good enough for her, it worked for me too. And the next time wouldn't mean any more than the last time.

I finished my shower and dressed with a tuneless song bouncing in my thoughts.

Adam wasn't in the kitchen. Or his bedroom. Not surprising, given his excitement for the discovery, and the fact that it was after nine.

The nameless song looped in my head, and I hummed to myself as I headed downstairs. Adam's voice drifted toward me as I walked toward the shop, and mingled with the fantasy from the shower. How many lessons, until Brooke was comfortable letting him join us?

How many lessons would there be, total? Should I put a cap on things? *No more orgasms after Lesson Five?* Five definitely felt low.

Brooke's laugh reached my ears, mingled with Adam's, and a weird spike jabbed my chest. I shoved it aside and joined the two of them in the main shop. "Morning."

The flush that spread across Brooke's face and her soft smile held a whole new meaning this morning.

"Dude, you need to check the store's voicemail." Adam jerked his head toward the front door. "And look."

Huh? I followed his nod, to see five people waiting outside the shop, none of them familiar. We didn't open for half an hour, and the lights were still off in here, but that didn't stop one of the visitors from pressing his hands and face to the glass and peering inside.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Messages first," Adam said.

This was getting weird. It was a rare day that we had one message, and this morning there were five. All of them asking about specific pieces of the new furniture.

I was listening to the last one, when Aubrey called my cell. I answered. “What’s up?”

“I have people calling me, asking about *the dresses in the video*. What video?”

I looked at Adam, who was watching me with a self-satisfied expression, and put Aubrey on speaker so she could hear me ask him, “What video?”

“I posted a teaser online, last night, of what we talked about. Highlights of the stuff we found, with a note that said a full series was coming soon. I woke up to over two-hundred thousand views.” Adam grinned.

“You didn’t tell me that. Congratulations.” Brooke’s enthusiasm was palpable.

And alluring. What would it take to make her this kind of excited more often?

Adam’s smile grew. “I wanted to tell everyone at once. It killed me to sit on that. You need to wake up earlier, dude.”

“She’s right—that’s amazing,” Aubrey said. “But what am I supposed to tell these people who are calling me? One said she was driving in from Ely and hoped I still had something to see when she got here.”

Ely Nevada was more than six hours away. —*the fuck?* This was awesome publicity, but there was no way I was set up to receive the business. “I can’t let people wander around that basement. It’s barely safe for us.” And I didn’t have the room to bring so many pieces up here. “What did you show in the preview?”

Adam sent Aubrey the link, and she said she’d be over as soon as she’d watched it and processed. Then he pulled the

video up for us. The three of us huddled around his phone was cozy, but there were other things to focus on.

Fortunately, the short video only highlighted a few pieces. When Aubrey showed up, coming in through the rear entrance to avoid the small crowd, we had twenty minutes until we both opened our doors. I pointed to her and Brooke. “You two carry the applicable clothing over to Aubrey’s. Adam and I will haul up the furniture in question.”

Brooke gave a lazy salute. “Yes sir.”

I did like the way she said that.

Carrying the heavier pieces up the stairs was rough—I had no idea how they’d gotten down there in the first place—but finding a spot for them on the sales floor was almost as difficult.

Brooke came back and insisted on helping with the furniture. Which was good, since we barely finished as it was time to open the shop.

The five people waiting turned out to be two couples, and one individual who took a quick look at what was available and said he’d be back when I had more ready to view.

“Leave your email, and we’ll let you know when the rest is coming up,” Brooke said. “We promise we only email when there’s furniture news.”

Smart thinking. I didn’t have anything like a newsletter, but apparently, I was about to.

The guy left his information, and the two couples wanted to sign-up as well.

“Feel free to take your time looking around,” I told them.

“We’d like the set of four high-backed chairs,” Michael said.

Brooke was definitely brilliant for getting their contact info.

Mr. Johnson—he and his wife hadn’t given their first names—held up a hand. “We’ll give you eight hundred for the set.”

Which was less than I’d charge, but more than I was willing to negotiate down to.

“One grand,” Michael countered.

Mr. Johnson frowned. “I can go to eleven hundred.”

What was happening? The chairs were neat and well preserved, but without an incredible restoration, they weren’t worth much. If either of these couples wanted to restore and resell, they’d struggle to find the right buyer.

Unless I’d been wrong in my appraisal. Which I never was.

“Fifteen hundred.” Michael really wanted these chairs.

Mrs. Johnson scowled. “They’re not worth it.”

“Aren’t they?”

Was there an actual bidding war going on in my shop? Maybe one of those wardrobes really did transport us to a magical world.

Mr. Johnson shook his head. “Can’t go that high, but make sure you let me know when the rest is ready to look at,” he said to me.

“We will.” Brooke was warm and friendly, as she shook his hand.

As Adam and I helped load the purchase into the back of a pickup, I was spinning ahead to the next steps. I had an idea what to charge for most of what we'd found, though some would need more research.

That didn't mean I had a place to put them.

We sent Michael and his wife, Veronica on their way. There was a text waiting for me from Aubrey, saying she'd sold two of the dresses.

"You'll need to make the basement part of your showroom," Adam said as we rejoined Brooke.

Saying it didn't make it any more plausible. "The place is lit with borrowed lights. There's no power. The stairs need to be looked at more closely. It's a great idea, but there's no way."

"I can wire you for electricity." Brooke made it sound like it was nothing.

I appreciated the offer. "If I do that, it's going to have to be code. Work done by licensed people."

"I am." She scrunched up her face. "Rather, I was. It may have lapsed, but it's easy enough to renew the license."

"Since when are you licensed?" And why didn't I know that?

She shrugged. "I found myself doing a lot of rewiring to support the sculpting and welding, and it was cheaper to learn to do it myself and get licensed, than to keep paying an electrician to come out."

"And I can take care of the stairs, plus block out enough of the walls and flooring to bring it up to code without damaging the original structure." Adam had worked for a contractor a

few years ago, when he wanted to build the houses he'd designed.

Their offers were fantastic, but I couldn't take them up on it. I wouldn't feel right, taking their time without paying them, and I couldn't afford that right now. "I don't know if this trend is going to last." Then there was the cost of supplies. "For all I know, those people this morning were the only ones interested."

As if the universe didn't appreciate being challenged, the Addams Family theme filled the shop when someone walked in. "Hello?" they called out. "I'm here about the furniture that was on Adam's Weird Menagerie?"

There wasn't much breathing or thinking room, as people continued to trickle in over the next few hours. When Dylan got in, Adam and Brooke vanished downstairs together.

I wanted to follow, but I was negotiating with a woman about my age on the cost of an old trunk.

My being busy didn't stop my mind from wandering over what kind of things could happen down there when two people were left unattended. The stab behind my ribs wasn't the *j*-word. Nope.

I was just concerned about my friends.

9

adam

“I DON’T KNOW that you’d make a great Lara Croft.”

Brooke looked at me, brows raised. “Excuse me?” She didn’t sound upset. More confused.

I hadn’t spent a lot of time with her without Deacon being here, so I didn’t know her well. The thing I tried to hide from most people was that I was socially awkward. I never said the right thing at the right time. “Your polygon count is too high.”

Her laugh wasn’t one of those *how stupid are you* laughs. It sparkled in her eyes and lit up her face. “And here I thought you were going to tell me I didn’t look enough like Angelina Jolie.”

“I mean, you don’t, but that’s not bad.” I should quit while I was ahead. I pointed to the wall that ran between Deacon and Aubrey’s shop. “Breaker box is straight up.”

“Should be easy enough to get to. How likely do you think it is that these walls are up to code, as is? Because I can’t bury electrical in this stone.”

“Do you have to bury it?”

Now Brooke looked puzzled. “I guarantee leaving wires exposed won’t pass inspection.”

“No, but what about hiding them under something like hollowed out trim?” I followed the wall to one corner, doing a moderate check of moisture and trying to gauge temperature. It wasn’t an exact science; I’d still need to do things properly. But this would give me an idea of what kind of work was needed down here, to make the place customer friendly. “I don’t think we have to put new walls over the existing stone.”

When Brooke didn’t answer, I turned back to see her face drawn in thought.

“That’s kind of brilliant, actually. Easy to get to. Easier to move once Deacon has more time to figure out what he wants as a finished product.” She grinned. “I like it.”

This would be easy. Depending on Brooke’s timeline, we could have Deacon sending customers down here within a week. “I need something to sketch this out on. Possible points to set up walls.”

Brooke rummaged in the oversized bag hanging from her shoulder and pulled out a notebook and pen.

“You have a Mary Poppins bag. Nice.” I took the offering and started counting off steps toward the middle of the room.

“It’s not quite as good as Mary Poppins’s bag, but I have a Mom-purse, so close enough.” She walked beside me. “Are you a Tomb Raider fan?”

“I’m a fan of anything even remotely archeological, especially when guns and ancient, vengeful spirits are involved. But my older brother...” The memories rushed back with unexpected potency. The downside to the therapy I’d started recently was that so much of the past floated near the surface, after I’d successfully ignored it for years. “Brandon loved the game. He taught me how to play.”

Seven-year-old me, sitting next to my *grown-up* fifteen-year-old brother, who had the patience of a saint back then, just knew I was the coolest second grader ever, as he coaxed me through each level.

I dusted away the discordant blend of happiness and bitterness.

“You okay?” Brooke asked.

“I’m fine. Sometimes the past just catches up to me, you know?”

For a heartbeat, sadness tinged her expression. “I do.” She shook her head. “So, walls. Where can we put them?”

We spent the next hour figuring out where changes needed to be made and where additional updates could be made, and sketching it all out.

The longer Brooke and I worked together, the more I found myself watching her, rather than my sketches. The way she tucked her hair behind one ear and caught the tip of her tongue between her teeth when she was thinking was simple but enthralling. Talking to her was easy; she understood my references, and I got hers.

Plus, she was fucking gorgeous.

So this was why Deacon was fixated on her.

Which was fine. He needed to close the deal with her, and I was just enjoying the scenery and the company.

When we had a good idea of what we needed to do, we headed upstairs to find Deacon.

He was selling the last piece we’d brought up this morning, a beautifully carved wooden dildo, to a man who looked like someone’s great grandfather.

To each their own.

There were two more interruptions while Brooke and I walked Deacon through our proposal, but the customers left their information and walked out when we told them there wouldn't be more available until later.

We finally finished explaining what it would take to make the basement ready for customers.

“How much will it cost?” Deacon asked.

I couldn't charge him for this. “Cost is negligible.”

He sighed. “*Negligible* doesn't sign checks or pay bills.”

“I've got a lot of this stuff in storage.” Not the wood, but the rest.

“And I have most of what I need at home,” Brooke said.

I was glad we were on the same page. This was about helping Deacon, even if it cost a little out of our own pockets.

Deacon frowned. “No. I want receipts when you're done. You're not footing the bill for my upgrades. Neither of you.”

I stared back.

“Promise me,” he said.

I'd been living here rent free since I lost my place, because Deacon refused to take my money. “Anything that costs more than I owe you in back rent, I'll give you receipts for. Labor is free, and you need this work done.”

“The money conversation isn't over, but you're right. I need to get people down there.” Deacon scrubbed his hand over his head. “Let's do—”

“Mister Onassis.” A new arrival interrupted in a tone that sounded too much like Hugo Weaving's *Mister Anderson* for

my taste. Travis Paddock was on the city council and had led the push for the regulations that had Deacon stressed about whether or not he'd get to keep his shop.

"I believe this is your store, featured in this film?" He shoved a tablet in Deacon's face, and my voice played, sounding tinny coming from the speakers. Cool. It was my video from last night.

Deacon raised an eyebrow. "You know it is."

"There are at least three violations of the new code in the way this was posted."

Bullshit. "The new code doesn't go into effect for a month. Besides, it's my video, and you can't control what other people post online about this street." I wouldn't let Deacon take the blame for this, especially when there was no blame to be had.

"Except that you live and work here. You're not a random visitor." Travis sneered. "And some of the items in this clip violate current zoning. You're not allowed to sell adult products and sex toys."

This man was Level Fifty intolerable, but until I figured out how to 3D print a phaser, I was pretty sure I couldn't disintegrate him without getting caught.

"They're not adult toys; they're antiques." Brooke was much more eloquent than I was, but the tightness in her reply was unmistakable.

Travis turned his gaze on her, as if seeing her for the first time since he arrived, and a sickly smile slithered onto his face. "Sister Doyle. You don't want to associate yourself with these people."

Sister Doyle? Okay, asshole.

“It’s *Brooke. Ms. Mansell-Doyle* if you insist on being formal.” She definitely sounded annoyed. “And these are exactly the types of men I want to associate myself with.”

I wanted to stick my tongue out, and say, *Nyah, so there*. This was why I shouldn’t interact with the general public.

Travis clucked and shook his head. “Poor, naive Brooke. You have no idea what he’s selling here, do you?”

I definitely wanted to disintegrate this guy, and Deacon’s clenched fist said he was considering a more tangible approach.

In contrast, a sweet smile spread across Brooke’s face. “I do know. I got a hands-on demonstration last night.”

Wait. What?

10

brooke

I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID that. Why did I say that?

I didn't care if Travis knew that I'd had any sort of intimacy with Deacon; I saved terms like *hate* and *loathe* for the severest of people, but I detested Travis Paddock. He'd pretended he cared about my grief, then pursued me without pause a year or so after my husband passed away.

But telling Travis anything was the equivalent of hanging large banners on every shopfront on Main Street.

Worse, the look on Adam's face was somewhere between shock and hurt.

No one was saying anything, but everyone was staring at me. What was I supposed to do now?

I gave a light laugh that sounded fake to my own ears. "Just kidding. But don't insult my intelligence like that again. I don't believe you have the power to walk in here and shut things down because you see perversion where most people see a chair."

Travis's nostrils flared. "This is not a game, and I'm not a cliché movie villain, trying to steal your livelihood. You can't sell those things under current zoning, and it will be on the docket at the next council meeting, Mr. Onassis."

“I look forward to arguing my case.” Deacon’s reply was smooth, and his expression blank. “You can find your way out?”

“Brooke.” Travis nodded at me before he left.

“Freaking asshole,” I muttered as the door swung shut behind him.

For the second time in as many minutes, I was met with twin expressions of shock. “Sorry.”

“Never apologize,” Deacon said. “And *bravo*, by the way. I can only think of a few things sexier than the way you put him in his place.”

I ducked my head, not sure how to respond. Was he teasing me? Did it mean more? After last night...

Which I was supposed to remember didn’t mean anything beyond the physical. No reason to read more into Deacon’s words than I did before.

“Speaking of, but not really—” Adam’s tone drew my attention. “Was there or was there not a hands-on lesson last night?” he asked. “Because that denial wasn’t exactly convincing.”

It really wasn’t, was it? *Oh geez*. Wait. If Adam didn’t know, Deacon wasn’t talking about it. Out of respect, or because what we did didn’t matter?

Nope. I wasn’t going to fall into endless questions when I’d been given an answer. “It was just a lesson.”

“The orgasms-and-no-clothes kind of lesson?” Adam asked.

I couldn’t do this. Yesterday, I couldn’t talk about sex without blushing, and that hadn’t changed. There was no way I

could casually toss out an answer in the same tone I might use when ordering food at a drive-through.

“There were both clothes and orgasms.” Deacon could. But I knew that.

Adam stared at him. “Dude.”

There was minimal inflection in the word. Was it praise? Disbelief? Something else?

“Dude.” Deacon shrugged.

Adam shook his head. “Don’t do that. Don’t *Baseketball* me.”

I assumed he meant the movie.

“You started it, and when was I going to tell you?” Deacon asked. “Today has been insane.” He looked at me. “Not that I plan on running around telling the world. What happened is between you and me.”

Which I understood, but also, I felt like I wasn’t quite part of this conversation. “He’s your best friend. I get it.” I wasn’t going to be the clingy person who didn’t understand the meaning of *we’re just friends*. Travis did that to me, once upon a time. And had the nerve to tell me he invested all that time in our friendship, so I owed him at least one date.

“And now that the room knows about last night, what are we doing in the basement?”

I winced at the phrasing of my question, because I wanted to follow it with, *More of what we did last night?*

“I can’t make changes like this without a plan.” Deacon really did have this under control. “Especially not if Travis has set his sights on the shop. Let’s finalize your plans.”

We dug through the details of what we needed to do, and the conversation shifted to dry details for a while.

“Do you think he’s jealous?” Adam asked out of nowhere.

“Who?” Deacon sounded puzzled.

But I had a pretty good idea. “Travis.”

“Of the basement.” Adam worked up a model on his laptop of the proposed work while we talked.

Deacon shook his head. “Because he needs more kink in his life?”

“Probably.” My answer slipped out before I could consider it. Like I was one to talk.

Adam tapped a series of keys, made a few mouse clicks, and sat back to show us the screen. “But also because he’s a basement dweller, and that’s a kick ass basement.”

I laughed. “I don’t have an argument. Zero.”

“I dunno. I know some pretty nice basement dwellers. It feels like an affront to them to lump them in the same category.” Deacon leaned in to flip through Adam’s work. “This is perfect. Let’s do it.”

“We can start bringing in supplies first thing in the morning.” I already had a list in my head of what I needed from my workshop. “My tools won’t fit in my car, though.”

“I have that problem all the time.” Deacon’s voice was light mixed with an exaggerated smoothness.

Adam exported his work to a pretty single file, and attached it to an email. “It’s why he drives the *big* truck.”

“Totally not because I’m over-compensating. Wink wink,” Deacon teased.

“Pretty sure you weren’t over-compensating last night.” Was I allowed to say that? The playfulness should be easy, but now things were different.

Or were they?

Adam worked his jaw. “That’s what she said?” His laugh was tight.

“Exactly. And she’s not the kind of woman to tell a lie,” Deacon said smoothly. “And I can swing by in the morning and pick up whatever you need brought back here.”

How did he do that? I was definitely going to need another lesson, or three, to figure out the nuances of this casual sex thing.

“Sounds like a plan.” I caught a glimpse of the clock on Adam’s laptop, and disappointment swam in. “Speaking of, I should get home.” I trusted my kids to be home alone without me, find food, and not wreck the house, but I liked to be around to hear about their day when I could, unless I’d warned them first. “First thing tomorrow?”

“Yes.” Adam sounded excited.

Deacon clenched his jaw. “My *first thing*, not his.”

“Aww. The day will be half over by then.” Adam’s pout was exaggerated.

I laughed again, waved over my shoulder, and headed outside. The highs and lows—but mostly the highs—of the day hummed under my skin, mingling with memories of last night. Adam was a lot of fun to hang out with, and he was cute. And aside from my doubt, Deacon was as tempting as ever.

As I was sliding into my car, my phone rang and I fished it out of my purse. “Hello,” I answered.

“Who are you and what have you done with Brooke?” It was Carly, and her tone was playful.

I’d been torn when I texted her this morning between a long explanation and simple request. I’d gone with simple, and apparently chosen wrong. Though, was there really a right answer? “I’m still me, I promise.”

“More spanking books? You’re not you.”

I laughed at her exaggerated disbelief. “I’m trying new things.” Would it be obvious I was trying them in real life as well? I wasn’t ready to surrender that information again. “In my reading.” Way to be subtle, me. Not.

“Reeaaally.” Carly drew the word out with a chuckle. “Do you want to add anything besides *spanking* to the list? Expand your horizons wider?”

I didn’t even know where to start. There were so many things in Deacon’s basement that I hadn’t realized were real or had never even heard of. There was one thing I liked a lot last night, though. “Restraints? Like handcuffs?”

“Bold woman, I like it. What else?”

“I have no idea. What else is there?”

Carly blew out a loud puff that echoed in my ear. “Your options run the gamut. Wax. Public sex. Humiliation. Knife play. Edging.”

I could picture what most of those phrases meant from a dictionary stand-point, and I felt like I was tip-toeing in the kiddie pool while Carly was trying to get me to high-dive into

the deep end of the Olympic-sized pool. “Wax? Like... wax lips?”

“Like candles. The hot wax leaves a little bit of burn on the skin and can paint pretty colors.”

“Burning sounds bad.”

“It’s not like a third-degree burn,” Carly said. Her tone softened. “It’s enough heat to sting but still be yummy.”

There were so many things I wanted to learn. The books would help, but I wanted hands-on demonstrations about each and every one I read about. I wasn’t quite ready to go all in, though. “I’m skipping the wax for now, but spanking and handcuffs...”

“You’ve got it, lady. I’ll send you a list.”

“Thank you.” I was grinning as I hung up. This has been a good day, and the next few seemed like they’d be even better.

I slid into my car, fit the key in the ignition, and turned.

Nothing happened.

11

deacon

BROOKE WALKED BACK into the shop moments after she left, and I couldn't help my smile. She didn't look as happy, though. "My car won't start. I'm sorry for the trouble, but maybe I could get a ride home? If not, I can call one of the kids, it's no big deal, but since I'm here and you're here, and ___"

"It's not any trouble, of course you can." I had to stop her before she rambled herself into justification-oblivion. Besides, a ride home meant alone time, and possibly seeing if the worktable in her shed was sturdy enough for—

"We could all go," Adam said. "Load up the tools tonight. It'll be faster with more hands."

Did he just... No. He didn't cock block me because she simply asked for a ride home. Besides, his suggestion made sense—a few of the things we needed to bring back here were going to take some lifting and maneuvering to get them into the truck without hurting anything or anyone.

Brooke grinned. "You could stay for dinner if you did that. It's Bryan's night to cook, and I'm pretty sure he made jambalaya."

“Not that you owe us anything, but that sounds pretty good.” I was all in for someone else’s cooking.

My ’85 F-150 was older than I was, and the bench seat was more than big enough for all three of us. Brooke sat nestled between Adam and me, her arm pressed into mine and the heat tempting me, on the ride back to her house.

We parked next to the large shed that was her sculpting and welding workshop. “Come inside, eat first, then we can do the hard work,” she said.

We followed her into the house.

“I’m home,” she called.

Brooke owned a farmhouse that looked faithfully restored from the outside, from the wood siding all the way down to the color of the trim and paint. Inside was a different story. She’d kept the original hardwood, but there wasn’t a flowered couch or doily anywhere to be found.

Her sculptures decorated the mantle, her brother’s art hung on several of the walls, and most other free spaces were filled with pictures of her kids and their various awards. The furniture was eclectic and well-worn, though the place was pretty clean.

I liked it—it always felt to me like people lived here who loved each other and living life, rather than feeling like a showroom piece.

“Is that Deacon’s truck?” Paige’s question came from upstairs. “Did you finally convince—” She came into view and froze on the top step. “Oh. Hello.”

Adam waved. “Hello.”

I smiled at the unfinished question. Paige had been trying to convince me for months to let her make some *modifications* to my truck. I needed it for work, and couldn't afford to have it out for several days just because. "No, she didn't. Especially considering her car is sitting dead in my parking lot."

"What? No." Paige joined us in the living room. "Not my fault. What's it doing?"

Brooke described the symptoms, and Paige's frown grew. "It was acting funny yesterday on the drive down to the shop, and then *bam* no start."

"Okay. I'll borrow the tow truck from Mr. Brown tomorrow morning and bring the car back to the school auto shop," Paige said.

"How long will I be without?" Brooke hung up her coat, then took ours and hung them on empty pegs by the door.

Paige was the one restoring Brooke's Bel Air. "Based on what you described, it's probably the timing chain, though it might be the transmission slipping. Either way, a couple of days at least."

"Or it's the distributor cap or wires," Adam said.

Paige's scowl reminded me of Brooke. "I replaced both just a few months ago. She doesn't exactly drive it into the ground."

"True. But parts can be bad, and it takes two minutes to check." Adam didn't necessarily work on cars, but he'd been an office manager at a repair shop for a while, and he had a head full of random mechanical knowledge.

She sighed. "People rarely get that lucky. Unlucky? But fine, I'll check."

“*Hey,*” Bryan shouted from the other room. “You’re supposed to be setting the table, Paige.”

“*Sorry.*” She looked at me. “Think about it. Tell me what I have to do to get that truck into the school’s garage.”

I shook my head. “Nothing. Not any time in the foreseeable future. Not happening.”

“Fine.” Paige huffed and headed into the kitchen.

“Set two extra spots,” Brooke called after her.

I always felt a twinge when I visited Brooke’s, or anywhere that her kids were around. An echo of a life I used to want so badly. When I was in my early twenties, I’d been engaged to the woman I swore was the love of my life. When she told me she was pregnant, I was thrilled. I was going to have a family, we were going to do everything right, and it was going to be amazing.

And when I found out she was carrying twins, I’d been over the moon.

About seven months into the pregnancy, I found out she’d been cheating on me. With my supposed best friend, for ages, and she was leaving me for him. There was no way I was letting her take my kids away from me. We’d work out custody, I’d still raise them and love them and give them the best life.

Except blood tests showed they weren’t mine.

Like that, my plans for the future had evaporated.

I could look back and see that it was for the best, that I was happy being the guy who didn’t tie himself down to any one person. Still, seeing Brooke with her twins always whispered *what if...* in my ear.

“Come on, let’s eat.” Brooke tugged us into the kitchen.

The table and chairs were from my shop, and were one of the few sets that matched the house they sat in. We took our seats, and dug into the food.

“How were your days?” Brooke asked.

Both kids had generic answers along the lines of *fine*.

How strangely normal was this?

“Oh, Mom.” Paige was suddenly excited. “Jamie and me ___”

“Jamie and I,” Bryan cut her off.

Paige rolled her eyes, finishing with a glare at her brother. “We can tell your story in a minute.”

“That’s not what I—”

“That’s not what *me* meant.” She stuck her tongue out. “I know what you meant, grammar nerd.”

Bryan clenched his jaw. “You sound more intelligent when ___”

“I’m intelligent regardless of my fucking language.”

There wasn’t enough malice in either twin’s voice for me to feel like this was a real argument, and instead, it was entertaining to watch.

“What did you and Jamie do, Paige?” Brooke brought the conversation back to its starting point, like a true master. That was kind of sexy.

Paige was all grins again. “We found the perfect dresses for the Sweetheart’s dance, and the perfect suit for Bryan, too. He’s going with us.”

“Aubrey has an honest-to-God zoot suit.” Bryan’s enthusiasm was back, too.

Paige’s eyes turned wide, in what I assumed was her go-to *mom will cave for this* look. “Can we buy them, please? I’ll do whatever chores you want.”

“Must be an amazing dress.” I figured it had to be, given the immediate shift in her mood, after taking good-natured grief from her brother. Though to be fair, most things Aubrey sold were pretty cool.

“So. Amazing. She’s got these flapper dresses, and there are these boots—”

“Tell her boots don’t go with dresses.” Bryan interrupted again. “Don’t let her get the boots, Mom.”

Adam set his fork down. “Boots go with anything if you know how to rock the look. My brother’s girlfriend is living proof.”

Paige pointed emphatically at him. “See? If Reese Fucking Ellis does it, it’s cool.”

Brook winced, I suspected at the language, but she didn’t correct Paige. Though Brooke didn’t swear much herself, she’d reached a point where she tried to let her kids be adults and make their own decisions, and that included about their language.

“How much?” Brooke asked.

Paige’s wince looked a lot like Brooke’s. “Three hundred for all of it.” Her reply was meek.

“Both dresses, plus the boots and the suit?”

Paige nodded. “Plus jewelry. It’s not real, but it looks really good with the dresses. I’ll fix your car.”

“You’re fixing my car regardless.”

“Bryan and I will do spring prep for the entire property next month.”

Bryan’s jaw dropped. “*Hey.*”

Paige fixed him with a look. “Do you want the suit?”

“We’ll do it,” Bryan agreed.

Brooke nodded. “It’s a deal. You can use the card, as long as it’s just for dance outfits.”

“Yay.” Paige clapped.

Bryan’s pleased smile was more reserved, but I suspected he was just as happy.

This was both disturbingly and soothingly sweet. I liked that Brooke managed to be a parent, but still let her kids make a lot of their own decisions. I respected and admired that, even though this whole vibe wasn’t for me.

Conversation faded while we ate. Adam and I both knew the basics of cooking, enough that we didn’t have to get take out every day and didn’t burn the house down when we used the stove, but this was a different level of home cooking than I was used to. It was really good.

“Before I forget,” Brooke said as we were finishing eating. “I may be out late tomorrow, helping Deacon with some wiring in his shop. If I’m not home when you’re done with school, fend for yourselves.”

“Oh, in the basement?” Bryan lit up. “Can we come by and see the new furniture?”

How much did they know about what we’d found?

Brooke shook her head. “Not until the place is up to code. Or possibly never while I’m alive.”

“We already know what’s down there. We saw it on Adam’s channel.” Bryan sounded like he believed his logic was inarguable.

I didn’t have to look at Adam to know he was fighting a smirk at the reach of his newly found fame.

Brooke shot both of us a look that was half-glare, half-*help*, and I shrugged. “Like you told Travis—they’re antiques. That’s what I sell.”

Paige snorted.

“We need to get some stuff from my shed into Deacon’s truck.” Brooke pushed back from the table. “Dinner was great, thank you, Bryan.”

Both kids looked disappointed at the end of the conversation, but they started clearing the table without prompting.

Adam, Brooke, and I headed outside.

“I’m not prepared for things like my kids exploring sex toys,” Brooke muttered, then looked at me with wide eyes, as if she’d just realized she said that aloud. She cleared her throat and unlocked the shed. “Those are the tools we need.” She pointed to a few larger items, and a large toolbox.

“The twins obviously have the internet.” I should let this go, but I had thoughts on her comment. “As long as you’ve had *the talk* with them, they’d probably rather just know they can come to you with problems and not have you judge them. If you’ve explained *this is how babies are made* and *consent good, internet porn unrealistic*, I suspect they don’t want to

hear you explain sex toys any more than you want to explain them.”

Brooke’s laugh was tinged with exasperation. “You’re probably right. Something to be grateful for, I guess?” She grabbed a smaller, metal box, and followed us outside to load things into the bed of the truck.

“Would it make you feel better if I gave them a PG tour of the basement when things are in a place where the public is allowed down there?” I fitted everything in place without much thought, and we went back for the rest.

“It would make me feel better if they weren’t curious at all, but I suppose they’re too old for me to hope that.” She stopped in the middle of the room and puffed out a sigh, blowing a few loose strands of hair out of her face. “Would you be okay with that?”

“Of course.”

“You’re the best, thank you.”

It was basic praise, but it warmed me from the inside out.

We finished loading the truck and Adam and I headed out. The night played on repeat in my mind, despite me wanting to move on. Brooke’s family wasn’t mine, and I could respect her and her situation without wanting to be a part of it.

I’d moved past wanting that life, and I was happy with what I had.

12

adam

“YOU AND BROOKE. It’s really nothing?” Why did I interrupt a perfectly comfortable, conversationless trip back to Deacon’s with a question like that?

“Yes.” Deacon didn’t hesitate. “I fully expect she’s spending her nights sifting through countless suitors, and I hope she’s finding at least one or two she can swipe right on. She deserves a happily ever after. She deserves a lot more than I’m offering.”

That was a lengthy answer, but it didn’t matter because it didn’t impact me either way. “Okay.”

A loose thought, related but just out of my grasp, floated at the edges of my mind. I tried to reach it, but it kept slipping away just as I got close.

My therapist could probably drag the reality out of me, but some days being analyzed and picked apart was draining. My mother had walked out on my father because they’d lied to themselves and each other about wanting the same things from their futures, and she finally admitted it when Baby Adam arrived.

This wasn’t the same at all. It was the opposite of a relationship. Besides Deacon and Brooke were adults who

could make their own decisions, but I didn't want to see either of them hurt.

When we got to the antique shop, Deacon and I spent the next few hours unloading the truck and making sure the basement was set for work tomorrow morning. We wrapped up and he stopped to clear out the store's voicemail. There were several more people asking about the things from the video.

He asked me to change the message to let people know nothing was currently available, but there would be more soon, and he returned calls to tell them the same thing.

I finished before he did, and was waiting to see if he needed anything else when the shop phone rang. "Deacon's Derelicts and D'Art," I answered.

"Hi. I'm looking for the guy who posted the video about your shop last night?"

I doubted he really wanted to talk to me, but I was happy to field any questions I could about the new pieces. "That's me."

"Hey. It's Adam, right? This is Sebastian from down the street."

"The new age tea shop, right? Hey. If you have questions about the furniture, Deacon can answer them better than me, but he'd probably give you a first look."

Deacon glanced at me at the mention of his name, but went back to his call.

"I'm actually looking for you," Sebastian said. "I have a few high-end pieces here that are really more to draw attention than to sell, though I wouldn't mind if someone paid for them. Would you be up for doing a similar video for me?"

That sounded cool. “Sure. I can’t guarantee you’ll get the same kinds of hits as the secret sex dungeon, but I’d be happy to.”

“I’ve got crystals that are supposed to cure impotency, and others that are dildos, how’s that for a draw?”

It was pretty good. We set up a time for me to head over on Sunday, and hung up.

Too cool. I should see if Aubrey was interested in the same. Maybe a few more of the shops on the block. Make an entire series that extended beyond Deacon’s, though the antique shop would have to stay the focus overall.

This was going to be fun.

BROOKE SHOWED up in the morning an hour before we opened, coffee in one hand and box of pastries in the other. “I thought we might need brain food today.”

“You’re a genius. And an angel. A beautiful genius angel.” I took the box from her, grabbed a cheese Danish, and set the rest on the counter. “I didn’t expect you so early. Deacon just got up.”

“The kids dropped me off on the way to school, but I couldn’t sit at the coffee shop any longer. I need to be doing something.”

“You’re off to a great start.” I grabbed another pastry and nodded toward the back room. “Do you want to head down there and get started?”

Her phone rang, and she glanced at the screen. “It’s Paige. Hang on.” She answered. “Hey. Shouldn’t you be in second

period?... That's fantastic, great job... Yeah, hang on." She held the phone out. "She wants to talk to you."

And here I was double fisting pastries like a five year old. I held up my full hands with a wince.

Brooke laughed and pressed the phone to my ear.

"Hello," I said.

"You were right about the wires." Paige sounded excited. "It worked, and the car runs... I have to go back to class now, which sucks, but everything's fixed."

"That's awesome. Way to go."

"Um..." Paige trailed off. "Could you maybe... I'm having a problem I can't figure out with my bike. Could you come by the house sometime and help?"

That sounded like fun. "I haven't done any work on motorcycles, but sure. Another set of eyes can't hurt."

"Thank you. Bye." Her smile was audible.

Brooke wrapped up the conversation with Paige, and wrapped up with an easy *Love you*. It was both disconcerting and comforting to see how close their family was. I was on friendly terms with my brother, but our relationship was in a different universe from what Brooke and her kids had.

The two of us headed into the basement. For the next several hours, most of our conversation was limited to the tasks at hand, and had Brooke and I at opposite ends of the room. Deacon came down a few times, but there was enough business coming in today that he needed to stay upstairs and work with customers.

Watching her do her thing while she was in view was fascinating. There was no hesitation, and her fingers moved

with an almost seductive skill and deftness.

As we drifted back together, I found myself watching her as much as working. The way she tucked loose strands of hair behind her ear, even though she wore a ponytail. How she caught her tongue between her teeth when she was focused. And especially the way her tone shifted toward brighter and stronger when she talked about something she was fascinated with—either the wiring or the last TV show she binged.

“You and Deacon...” The start of the question slipped out before I realized what I was about to ask. Not that I had any idea why I needed confirmation. I really should let this drop.

But her curious gaze stalled me. “What about us?”

I didn’t know her nearly well enough to ask her, but here I was regardless. Wanting to know if she saw him as anything besides a fuck buddy. “The agreement the two of you have...”

“We’re friends. That’s all we are.” Her answer came as quickly as his last night. “He’s giving me lessons. Nothing more.”

“Cool. Just curious.” But it was more than that, wasn’t it? What was I doing? Besides letting my mind drift more the longer I watched her. Wondering what it would be like to walk in one of those lessons. What it would be like to either help teach, or get to experience the results.

“Why?” Brooke’s question caught me off guard.

It shouldn’t have. It was a reasonable question. “Just looking out for friends.”

“Okay.” She turned back to her work.

“When did you lose your husband?” What was wrong with me today? There was awkward, and then there was just

insensitive. “You’ve really been single the entire time since?”
No, really. What was I doing?

The way Brooke was staring at me, I assumed she was thinking the same.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. If I ever ask something inappropriate, just tell me to stop. I’m not made for casual conversation.”

“It’s okay.” Her tone was light. “You surprised me, but I’d rather you said what was on your mind than what you thought I wanted to hear.”

“I’m not very good at that second one. Mostly because I’m so bad at figuring out what people want to hear.” Human beings were odd and confusing creatures.

She pointed to the junction box she was working on. “I need a second set of hands. Can I borrow yours?”

Just tell me where to touch you. I wouldn’t say that, because channeling Deacon wouldn’t help me. “Sure.”

“Hold these here.” She pointed to two wires. “Don’t let the tips touch.”

My snort slipped out.

She raised her brows. “Penis joke?”

“It sounds both dirtier and not when you say *penis joke* instead of *dick joke*.”

Brooke laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.” She worked to attach the wires I was holding to the entire structure. “It’s been a while. Since I lost my husband, that is. The twins barely remember him, and after he passed away I was focused on raising them.” The catch in her voice was faint, but I

recognized it because I sounded the same when my Dad came up.

“I have a hard time believing no one in this town was hitting on you.”

“They were. Maybe someday, when I’m already pissed off and in a mood to make it worse, I’ll tell you the story about Travis.”

“I can’t wait?”

This time her laugh was brighter. More real. “Over here next.” She moved us to a new pair of wires.

“Seriously, the guy’s a tool.” Want whispered through me every time she brushed her hands over mine. How much longer could I ignore that? “A teensy tiny tool. Like the kind you get in one of those *home repair* gift sets, and the entire thing is so cheap that nothing in the box works except maybe the screwdriver, and it only works as a hammer.”

Brooke’s laughter grew—that was a pretty sound. “Is he the screwdriver, then?”

“Pretty sure he’s the wire cutters. More likely to cut off the tip of your finger than do what he’s actually supposed to.”

“Another penis joke?”

I shook my head. “No, but now I wish it had been. I’m glad you didn’t give him the time of day.”

“Oh?”

“You deserve better than any schmuck in this town.”

Pink tinged her cheeks. “You need to be at the same angle as me for this one.” She pointed to a new spot. “Probably behind me.”

I'd rarely wanted to hear someone say that more than I did right now, regardless of context. I moved to stand behind Brooke, and offered my arms. She guided me into place, and it took what little common sense I had to not push into her back.

"You and Deacon are in this town," she said softly as she worked.

I wouldn't lean in and smell her hair. That would be creepy, but also prove my point. "But we're not really part of it. Also, we're still schmucks."

"You're really not. I need you closer."

And if I got too much closer, she'd feel my cock getting harder with each breath. I tried to find a compromise in following her instructions and not falling into how it felt to have my arms wrapped around her. "We could argue over how awesome I am, or you could tell me your favorite superhero movie."

I had enough self-awareness to know why I'd asked that. I wanted to shift away from a subject I never should have touched, and at the same time, find a reason to not be enthralled by Brooke.

"That depends." She worked quickly, as if she'd done this a thousand times before.

"On what?"

"Are we talking character development, action, or humor?"

Fuck, she was sexy. "You didn't include *plot* in that list."

She glanced over her shoulder, her smirk of disbelief close enough I could lean in and steal a kiss. "Nope." She turned back to her work. "And I'd leave it off again and again. All done."

Fantastic. Except that meant, “I suppose I have to let you go now.” I shouldn’t have said that aloud.

“Do you have to?” She turned, not dislodging my arms. She was so close. So tempting.

“Maybe not. This is pretty nice, isn’t it?”

The way she studied me with those dark brown eyes that seemed to peer right into my soul, I swore she knew exactly what I was thinking.

“It really is.” Her reply was breathy. She was so close. So stunning.

I slid a hand to her cheek and brushed my lips over hers. I shouldn’t be doing this with her. Not with the sparks between her and Deacon. But if they were going to insist their relationship was friendship, and was she leaning into me rather than away?

I deepened the kiss, licking dust from her lips and memorizing how soft they were. She smelled like flowers and ozone, which was now officially my favorite scent. The soft gasp that escaped her chest drove straight to my groin.

“*Dude.*” Deacon’s voice cut through the kiss.

Fuck. What was I doing?

13

brooke

“THIS ISN’T... It’s not... It was a moment of weakness.” Adam’s denial sliced through me.

Especially since he still had me pinned to the wall, and that incredible kiss still buzzed through my entire body. I shoved him back enough to step away. “Sorry to be such a temptation.” There was no apology in my tone, because screw that.

“No, I didn’t mean... *Fuck.*” Adam scrubbed his face and put a couple more feet between us.

“Paige dropped your car off. She said to be careful if you’re out late, because it’s supposed to snow.” Deacon’s tone was cool.

That was fine. Our relationship was only supposed to heat up during *class*. “Great. I can’t do much more here until we can turn off the building power, so I’m going to head out.” Lick my emotional wounds. Wonder why I let my defenses down for even a second with Adam.

Because things hadn’t been that easy and carefree with anyone for a long time. Sure, there was heat with Deacon, but I still questioned so much. With Adam...

Apparently I hadn’t questioned nearly enough.

Deacon handed me my keys without a word, and I headed toward the stairs.

“Don’t.” Adam’s tone stopped me, even though the deceptive blend of request and sadness should’ve set me on high alert. “Neither of you can leave until the three of us talk through this.”

Absolutely ridiculous. “Talk through what?”

“The fact that the tension in this room just cranked up by about a billion atmospheres.”

Even being pissed off at Adam, I wanted to smile at his answer and how uniquely him it was.

“There’s no tension.” Deacon’s ability to stay removed had been sexy less than forty-eight hours ago, and now it tore at me. “I was surprised, but I’m over it. Obviously Brooke was going to see other people, that was the point.”

Obviously.

“I just didn’t think it would be happening right under my feet. Or that it would start with kissing.”

“It did with you.” I turned to face them.

Deacon’s smile was thin.

I had no idea what was happening. My insides were a mess, from my brain to my heart to my stomach. “I didn’t think this was how our second lesson would go.” I needed to rebuild some emotional walls. I thought they were solid, given they’d been in place for more than a decade, but all it took were a couple of kisses from a couple of gorgeous, fun, younger men, and I felt as exposed as if I’d been stripped bare.

That didn’t bode well for my dating future.

“Both of you stop.” Adam’s voice was harder this time. “Don’t say anything else yet, as much as I’d love some company in the *I really regret talking* category.”

I stared at him, waiting.

Adam worked his jaw. He laughed nervously. “I didn’t expect you to both listen. Brooke, it wasn’t a lapse in judgment. I wanted to kiss you, and I’m not sorry I did.”

Did Deacon just growl? A glance at him showed a casual expression and stance. I must have imagined the sound.

“How long do you need the power off?” Deacon asked.

And we were changing the subject. Fine. “Everything’s in place. I really only need ten or fifteen minutes to hook it up to the main box if everything goes smoothly. More realistically, half an hour. If things go badly, an hour or more.”

“I locked up before we came down here, but I’d like to make sure we don’t impact Aubrey or anyone else on the block. We have a couple of hours to wait until the rest of the shops are closed.” This wasn’t Deacon. This was a pod person who had taken his place and didn’t know how to make inappropriate jokes or tease me until I turned red or make my insides flutter from the attention.

And this definitely wasn’t the Deacon I called a friend. I didn’t understand how any of this *casual physical relationship* stuff worked at all. “Great. I’ll be back then.” I walked out before anyone could stop me. Not that anyone called my name.

As the jumble in my mind rearranged itself into words I could grasp, I stopped halfway up the stairs, turned around, and headed back. “This isn’t right,” I said as I approached them. “This isn’t what I signed on for, and it’s so far from

what I wanted from *lessons* the other night that..." I'd what? "If I have to tell you both *no more touching* to get things back to normal, I will."

Adam raised his brows.

Deacon sighed. "I wasn't expecting what I saw. It's fine."

That kiss was better than *fine*. It was really good, and I wouldn't mind more of the same from Adam, more in general from him. My brain stumbled on the logic trap. Did that mean giving up lessons with Deacon? Was I about to come between friends? I'd never had to think about things like that before and I didn't know what to do next. "What now?"

So much for coming back to demand we make things better. I wasn't prepared to make good on my threat, but I didn't have a solution. Maybe if I'd waited for later lessons, I'd know how to handle *I want sex from two different men. Who also happen to be best friends.*

"Let's make this simple," Deacon said. "You have to answer honestly, like Truth or Dare, but both at the same time."

"That would be Truth *and* Dare," Adam corrected him.

At least the snippet of banter felt familiar. "I think that's fair."

"Does anyone want to take anything back?" Deacon looked at each of us. "Kisses? Lessons? Anything along those lines?"

"No," I said at the same time Adam did.

Deacon nodded. "Me neither. I can only think of one solution."

I watched him, more than curious to hear his answer.

“All three of us sleep together.”

Was that a thing? Rather, I knew some people did it—my brother was in love with two other people—but not me.

“Sometimes I forget what an asshole you are.” Adam didn’t sound as bothered as his words implied.

Deacon shrugged. “I didn’t hear you offering a better idea, which is usually your thing.”

It was an absolutely insane suggestion, but that didn’t mean I hated it. The longer I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of more kisses from both of them. More touches. More... more. And all of it at the same time? The images lit my skin on fire. “I’m in.”

Twin looks of shock greeted me, but Deacon recovered first. “See? Brooke’s in.”

“This is idiotic.” Adam’s chuckle was strained. “But Brooke’s pretty smart, so if she’s in, I’m in.”

On numerous occasions, I’d been told things like *you’re so pretty* as it related to my love life, but *pretty smart* was one of the sexiest things anyone had ever tossed out as a casual comment about me.

“And honestly, thank God.” Adam closed the distance between us in a few short strides, and cupped my cheeks in his palms. “Because”— He crashed his mouth down over mine, swallowing my whimper of surprise and sending need coursing through me.

Using his full body, he guided me back until I collided with Deacon, who dug his fingers into my hips and pressed into me.

This was different in the most incredible way.

“Is there anything you want to try?” Deacon’s question rumbled through my back.

I, uh... The naughtiest thing I’d ever done was give my husband a blow job and swallow. That seemed so tame compared to all of this.

“Another lesson for you.” As Deacon spoke, he nudged up my shirt with his thumbs, and teased along the bare skin just above my waistband. “We’ll help you figure out what you like, if you can learn to ask for what you want to try. Any man who doesn’t want to hear what you want isn’t worth your time.”

Adam trailed a finger slowly down my chest. “There’s something indescribably sexy about hearing someone say something like *spank me, please*.”

“That. That’s what I want.” I didn’t even need to think about it. Not anymore than I had been for the last couple of days.

Deacon brushed the edge of my ear with his lips. “I think he wants to hear you say it.”

This wasn’t a big deal. They were words. They only held power if I gave it to them. But I was willing to give them a lot of power. “Spank me, please?” The taste was spicy and the potential for what they could summon coiled in my belly and flooded me with anticipation.

So did Adam’s wicked, playful smirk.

“Just like that.” Deacon’s voice was thick.

Adam tangled his fingers with mine. “We should take this upstairs.”

“We did it downstairs the other day.” I wasn’t picky about the location, but a teensy part of me was terrified that if we

moved, this entire fantasy would fall apart, and I'd wake up to a much less sexy reality.

Adam tugged me gently toward the stairs. "You'll want to get comfortable for this."

"For you to slap my butt."

"Yes." He paused and leaned closer. "Because I promise it's going to sting."

Oh, geez. I was already more turned on than I thought possible, and we hadn't really started.

As we headed past the main floor and up to the second where Deacon's apartment was, I swore it was obvious what we were about to do.

It wasn't. I hung out here a bit and had a good reason for being here today. There was nothing unusual, and it wasn't as if anyone was paying attention to us anyway.

That didn't stop me from feeling like I had a huge *I'm about to sleep with two men* neon sign flashing above my head. How was I going to do something I had a hard time even saying in my own head? I had no clue, but as much as my mind stumbled over the words, my body was humming with the desire to find out.

I was barely aware of what Deacon and Adam were saying when we got upstairs, because my pulse was hammering so hard in my ears. There was something about using Deacon's room because his bed was bigger, and he had that heavy headboard...

And now I was thinking about why that mattered, and I was straddling a wobbly, terrifying line between anticipation and anxiety.

“Hey.” Deacon’s heat against my back and his arms around my waist yanked me out of my thoughts and helped ground me. “You still here?”

Adam was in front of me, a gentle finger under my chin holding my gaze level with his. “You can stop any time. Now. Later. If it’s too much. If it’s not enough.”

What I meant to be a casual laugh came out more as a nervous titter. “I can’t imagine it not being enough.”

“Something to feel fortunate about.” Adam’s voice was playful. He pressed his lips to my forehead.

Some of the knots inside me loosened. This was terrifying, but the men were acting so much more like themselves than what I’d seen in the basement when Deacon walked in on us. These were my friends. People I trusted. I didn’t have the same agreement with Adam that I did with Deacon, but that just meant I was allowed to feel something for him.

I wasn’t going to further muddy my thoughts with that kind of logic. Not now. But I didn’t mind the possibility.

“Are you good?” Deacon’s question was all concern.

I appreciated that he was checking in, like he did last time. “Yes.”

And then they were stripping me out of my clothes a piece at a time, with so many tender kisses dotted in between. Part of me wanted to curl up and hide, not because of them, but because I was on display, naked in all my not-so-glory.

But the way Adam studied me, an easy smile tugging up his lips and appreciation in his eyes, lit my skin on fire. The way Deacon ran his hands over my body, over everything I thought was too wrinkly or pudgy or had stretch marks, and he never paused or pulled away, helped bolster my confidence.

Adam grasped my hand and led me to the bed. “Kneel on all fours.”

If I didn’t stop hesitating, tonight would never happen, but telling myself that didn’t unstick my feet from the floor.

“The position always feels awkward when you start,” Deacon said.

I looked at him. “Is that supposed to be reassuring?”

“Yes. You’re not the only one who feels that way. But once you realize what’s about to happen, the awkwardness is easy to ignore.”

“Can we get to that part?”

Adam’s chuckle was like strong, delicious fingers digging into me, and I couldn’t help but comply.

Yup, it was definitely weird, being on all fours, naked with all my saggy bits sagging even more, in front of other people.

Adam leaned his head in next to mine, until we were cheek to cheek. “I’m going to keep this simple. If you want me to stop, at any point, you tell me so. Just like that.”

I wasn’t so sheltered that I didn’t know what a safe word was, but I was grateful that tonight I didn’t have to remember to use one, on top of everything else. I couldn’t handle that.

Adam’s hand cracked across my fleshy skin. The slap was loud and the sting made me whimper.

“Do you want me to keep going?” Adam asked.

It hurt, but I liked it. “Yes.”

The next slap was on the other cheek, and it hurt just as much. The next couple were worse. But Then the sting lessened. A strange numbness set in. Adam paused every few

strikes to glide his palm gently along the curve of my behind, which intensified my need. Increased the throbbing from my core. Made me wetter.

And then instead of withdrawing his hand for another slap, Adam slid between my legs. I gasped at the penetration when he slid inside me, and I was too wound up in all the sensations to do anything but drift toward his touch.

Deacon knelt next to me—I'd almost forgotten he was here—and cupped my breasts. He kneaded gently, then switched to rolling my nipples between his fingers.

I rocked between them, wrapped in bliss and floating in a kind of pleasure I'd never felt before.

Adam moved his other hand to my clit, and a new shock spilled over me. He teased and coaxed and nudged me into a climax that stole my thoughts and my breath and left my throat raw as Adam and Deacon eased their touches away.

Had I been screaming? I didn't know. I didn't care. *Wow.*

But there was something else I needed. As Deacon reached for me I said, "Wait."

adam

I SWORE my heart stopped when Brooke said *wait*. This woman... I wanted to do so many things to her. With her.

I knew I had a light sadistic streak, and I'd learned long ago how to find outlets for it—learned that destruction was best when it was followed by healing. And Brooke whimpering but begging for more... I wanted to hear that, to feel that, again and again.

How Deacon was relegating himself to *lessons* was beyond my comprehension.

But now she wanted us to wait.

“This is wonderful, but it'd be better if everyone was having orgasms,” Brooke said.

And now she was sexier.

“What do you want next, in that case?” Deacon knelt next to her and looked her in the eye. “I know it feels awkward at first, but I promise you the dirty talk is hot, and it doesn't have to be flowery. *I want you to fuck me* works great.”

Brooke shook her head. “I can't say those words normally. How am I supposed to string them together to say that?”

I pulled her into me, my hand on her stomach and her back molding to my front. I pressed my still-slick fingers to her lips.

She didn't hesitate to draw me in and suck herself from my fingers.

So. Good.

I trailed my lips up her neck. "Now you've got a dirty mouth. Might as well make the best of it."

Her laugh was light and carefree, and it was almost a guarantee that delicious sound was going to make me hard every time I heard it after tonight.

"I want to taste you, Deacon. I want you in my mouth." Brooke managed shy and direct in the same breath.

Deacon groaned a *fuck yes*, and I didn't blame him. He shifted his weight, not leaving the bed.

Brook clucked. "Clothes off. If I'm going to be naked, I get to see both of you, too." She kept getting hotter.

"Smart woman." I nipped her earlobe with a smirk.

Her soft sigh lit me up.

"So, can I...?" Brooke's hesitation was back.

"You won't know unless you ask," Deacon said.

"Can I have Adam inside me while I'm sucking on you?"

Fuck the Hell yes. "Don't go anywhere." I was reluctant to step away, but there were steps to be followed.

Brooke glanced over her shoulder at me. "Where am I going to go? Detroit?"

South Park reference. *Hot*. I slapped her lightly on the ass—really it was more of a tap—and her gasp was worth it.

Deacon and I undressed, and I rolled on a condom.

He settled on the bed near Brooke. She crawled toward him. I was captivated as she drew her tongue tentatively along the tip of his cock, and I groaned along with him when she took him in her mouth.

I knelt behind Brooke, and took the penetration so slowly it ached. But fuck it felt incredible, feeling her pussy around my shaft, slick and tight, encasing me until I was buried deep. Plus, she was making the most incredible sounds, and the way she was making Deacon's face contort with ecstasy was pretty good too.

The series of events were captivating. I needed to go slowly; it was so tempting to thrust and bust and blow my wad. Instead, I took my time withdrawing from Brooke before plunging back in again, teasing my fingers over her skin, and then moving back to her clit.

I stroked until her sighs became moans and then stuttered cries. She pulled back from Deacon, and she was so deliciously loud when she came. She clenched around my cock as she ground back into me and let out a string of not-quite *oh, Gods*.

It took the last of my restraint to keep from not bursting right then.

As her orgasm ebbed, she ducked her head and returned to sucking Deacon off with full enthusiasm. Though I couldn't see her face, I had a perfect image of the sweetness Deacon saw when she looked at him and pleaded, "In my mouth?"

Jesus. This woman.

Deacon wrapped one fist around his cock and knotted the other in her hair and guided her head back down.

Brooke ground against me as she worked Deacon to the point his head tilted back and his grunts grew punctuated. The familiar sound of his climax, combined with Brooke's warm, wet pussy sheathing me, was almost too much. I gripped her hips tightly, needing something to focus on besides release.

Brooke pulled away from Deacon, and he shuddered as he slid from her mouth. Her giggle was one of self-satisfaction.

I was done holding back. I slammed inside her fast and hard, my body already clenching in anticipation. Desire spilling through my veins, coiling in my gut, and tightening in my balls. I needed to feel Brooke clench around me one more time, so I sought out her clit again. It didn't take much to draw another orgasm from her, and *fuck* the sensation was delicious.

The world slowed to a vibrant, lazy technicolor when I came, dancing behind my clenched eyelids as orgasm spilled from me.

I kept thrusting until I couldn't anymore, then leaned forward to kiss along Brooke's back.

The three of us collapsed in a pile and lay there for a moment catching our breath. I had the presence of mind to extract myself long enough to clean up and help Brooke do the same, but then I was content to fall back under the blankets with both of them.

We should get up again soon. Get dressed. Head into the basement and finish the wiring.

But that meant letting go of Brooke and leaving behind the warmth of Deacon. That meant covering up the stunning red handprints on her ass. Fuck, I hope she thought of me every time she sat down over the next day or two.

“We should get back to work.” The reluctance in her voice matched mine.

A loud boom sounded outside, and a second later the lights blinked out. My heart hammered against my ribs at the abrupt sound. “What the fuck?”

“It’s that stupid transformer down the street.” The mattress shifted as Deacon climbed from the bed.

The only light in the room was a pale glow coming in around the curtains, making it impossible to see even my own hand in front of my face. As Deacon drew closer to the window, the soft gleam cast his naked form in a hauntingly beautiful silhouette. If I had my camera, I’d want to capture the sight.

He opened the curtains and bathed the whole room in the eerie gray of snow and clouds reflecting off each other. “Power’s out on the whole street.”

I sighed loudly and flopped my weight back against the pillows, pulling Brooke with me. Her surprised giggle was musical.

“Can’t do much without power—except conserve body heat—we should probably stay in bed.” I was brilliant if I did say so myself.

Brooke clucked. “Tempting. *Really* tempting.”

“You’re not going anywhere else for a while anyway.” Deacon was still staring out the window. “Somehow we fucked our way into a blizzard.”

“I think I saw that movie. We need to be careful, because the horny zombies are coming for us,” I said.

Deacon turned to face us, laughing. “Coming for us, or *coming* for us?”

“They’re zombies, so eww.” Brooke scrunched up her face. “I mean, unless that’s your thing, I guess?”

“I definitely prefer my groans to come from the living.” I nipped her shoulder with my teeth, and she rewarded me with the most delicious sound.

She extracted herself from my arms and moved to the edge of the bed. “I should call the kids. Make sure they’re all right.”

“Tell them you probably won’t be home tonight,” Deacon said.

Brooke plucked her clothes from where they’d landed, wrinkled her nose when she grabbed her panties, and just tugged on her shirt and jeans. “Because of the snow.”

“That too.” I grinned. The moment might have been interrupted, but now there was a chance for more fun later. Snow days were the best.

Deacon and I dressed, and he called the power company while Brooke called home. I went in search of candles.

They found me before I found what I was looking for. If Deacon didn’t have candles, I did. We’d repurpose them for the night.

“Power company says ETA is at least tomorrow morning,” Deacon said.

“I guess we’ll have to cuddle to keep warm.” I didn’t mind the idea of that.

Deacon gestured to the wood burning stove in the corner of the kitchen. “And maybe haul some wood up, for that. Not that I have much.”

“We should make sure everyone else on the block is set for a night without power,” Brooke said.

Not every shop owner on the street lived above their place like Deacon, but several of them did. We bundled up and headed outside. A few of the neighbors were already out here—Aubrey, Sebastian, and others I’d only met a couple of times.

Fortunately, Travis the Tool was probably home safe and sound in his house on the hill, because his trollish face might ruin the gorgeous still that was out here tonight.

After a brief exchange, everyone agreed they were set for tonight, and they all promised no one would be freezing to death.

Sebastian had an actual fireplace, and invited anyone over who needed it.

As we turned to head back in, Brooke slipped and let out a horrible and heart-wrenching whimper of pain.

deacon

THE SOUND BROOKE made sliced through me worse than the cold. She was on the ground in more than a foot of snow, cringing and struggling to find her footing.

I offered her a hand and tugged her to her feet. She let out a yelp when she put her weight on the right one, and I wrapped an arm around her waist before she could stumble again, and Adam was at her other side without hesitation.

“I’m sorry.” She sounded forlorn.

I held her upright. “Don’t be.”

“It hurts. Enough that I’m thinking about swearing.”

I wanted to kiss the hurt away. Nothing deep-throat, tonsil-tickling, but something sweeter, like a peck on the cheek or the forehead kiss Adam gave her earlier. But that hardly felt like a *just friends* kind of gesture.

“Don’t try to walk on it.” Sebastian joined us. He’d been an EMT before he inherited his shop from his grandmother. “Get her inside.”

I scooped Brooke into my arms, and her surprised gasp sounded too much like the sounds she’d made when she was being spanked. She relaxed in a breath, molding herself to my

chest. This was both way better and far worse than the gasp on its own.

I shook my reactions aside, carried her into the shop, and set her gently on a stool behind the counter.

Adam used his phone to light the path after we left the brightness of the snow behind.

“Didn’t even get winded. I’m impressed.” Sebastian clapped me on the shoulder.

Adam stood at Brooke’s side. “He is. He’s just too manly to let it show.”

I raised my brows, not trusting myself to speak without gasping for air.

Adam and I offered the best light we could with our phones, while Sebastian checked Brooke’s ankle, prodding and twisting gently and asking her if it hurt after each movement. At his request, I stepped away long enough to grab an ace bandage, and pack some snow into a storage bag.

I wanted to run into the basement and grab the battery powered lights as well, but I wasn’t sure where we’d left them and stumbling around in limited light, in the cold, was a bad idea.

When I returned, Sebastian wrapped her foot up with the bandage. “Ninety-nine percent sure it’s a mild sprain. Nothing looks like it’s broken or cracked, but keep your weight off it for the next couple of days, elevate it when you can, ice it as often as you need, and make sure you get to a doctor for a second opinion.”

“Thank you.” Brooke gave him a warm smile.

“No problem. You know where to find me if you need me.” Sebastian gave a wave, and headed out.

As soon as he was gone, Brooke hopped from the stool, landing on her good foot.

“Whoa,” I said at the same time as Adam. “What did you not understand about staying off your feet?” I asked.

The look Brooke gave me lacked any apology. “He told me to keep my weight off it. I am. What are you going to do, carry me everywhere?”

“If I have to.” I wasn’t going to let her make the injury worse.

Would I go to this kind of effort if Aubrey was the one who was hurt? Or Adam?

Of course I’d be this protective of Adam. Where did the thought come from? “What are you off to do, anyway? We can’t go anywhere.”

“I’m going to use the toilet. And our relationship—whatever it is—is not in a place where you’re carrying me into the bathroom and waiting while I finish.”

That was fair. “Wait thirty seconds.” I strode away at a quick pace, and returned with a cane I’d fetched from a bin of them. “But then we’re going upstairs, and you’re staying there the rest of the night.”

Brook studied me, contemplation written on her face. “All right.”

When we made it upstairs, we decided putting her in Adam’s room made the most sense—it was closest to the bathroom and kitchen. As irrational as it was, especially since

we planned on all three of us sticking together for warmth—jealousy flashed through me at the decision.

When Adam pulled candles from one of the boxes he had stacked against the wall, the feeling surged again. He extracted several colorful, soy candles, and set them around the room.

“Pretty colors,” Brooke said as Adam lit each one. “Will the scents clash?”

He shook his head. “They’re unscented.”

“Oh.” Brooke sounded like she’d never heard of such a thing.

I suspected she didn’t know what the candles were really for, but I recognized them as one of Adam’s favorite *special occasion* toys. Wax play meant pain plus art, and of course he enjoyed that. I’d enjoyed being the recipient on occasion as well, but now I was wondering how Brooke would react.

It didn’t matter, because we were using the candles to light the room. Nothing more.

I lit a fire in the stove and made sure the smoke was going up the chimney instead of into the house, and Adam got Brooke situated in bed. I returned to find her in a half-reclined position with her leg propped up on a few pillows.

A chill had already settled into the house, so Adam and I made ourselves comfortable on either side of Brooke and pulled the comforter around us. We were all fully clothed, so it wasn’t the sexiest thing I’d ever done, but it sent a thrill racing through me anyway.

“Since it’s too early for bed, what should we do?” Adam asked.

I had a few ideas, but I wasn't sure getting naked and sticky was the smartest way to kick off an evening without power or heat. We'd save that until the lights came back on.

“What's Sebastian's deal, do you know?” Brooke asked. “How do you go from EMT to new age tea shop owner?”

When it came to the history of this street, I had a pretty solid base of knowledge. Though my grandparents left out the basement details from the stories they told me as a kid, I assumed the rest of what they told me had some elements of truth in them, and I'd seen how the place changed since then. I also knew the stories of most of the people on the street.

And Sebastian's story was one of the most interesting ones. “He's a genius. That's not a phrase I toss out there lightly, he's one of those high IQ people. His senior year of high school, he came up with a killer tech idea. Well, killer at the time. He was going to build a website that made it easy to book flight, hotel, and car rentals, basically reserve your entire vacation, in a single place.”

“Did someone steal his idea?” Brooke sounded fascinated.

I winced. “Not exactly.”

“Sebastian is a big idea guy. Big ideas, but the way he wants to put those ideas into practice aren't always the most marketable. Not that I take issue with that.” Creation for the sake of creation was a wonderful thing. “But he had a friend at the time who saw a different application for Sebastian's idea. He didn't share that insight with Sebastian, but he did sell the concept to investors. Hundreds of millions in investments, for a piece of software that was nothing like what Sebastian was building.”

Adam hissed. “Ouch. Why don't I know this story?”

“It’s not exactly the kind of thing he broadcasts.” Though I wasn’t sure why *I’d* never told Adam. “Anyway, like so many vaporware products of the early 2000’s, the company crumbled when investors realized there was nothing there. Sebastian was so burned on the whole thing that he got out of tech completely, and got his EMT certification instead. He was doing that until his grandmother passed away about six years ago and left him her shop. He feels an obligation to make it work.”

We made our way down the street, story-wise, talking about Aubrey and her place, the music shop, and every other building, business, or owner I knew the history of. Brooke and Adam both seemed to devour the stories.

“What about you?” Brooke’s question surprised me.

It shouldn’t have—it made sense given the topic—but I stumbled on my response. “What about me?”

“What’s Deacon’s story?” she asked.

Adam raised his hand. “I would also like to know that.”

“You already know my story. I basically grew up in this place and I inherited it. Except unlike Sebastian, I was familiar with my trade and happy to step into the role.”

Brooke furrowed her brows and nodded her head. Her *hmm* was contemplative. “I give it a six.”

“You’re being generous. I might have gone with four-point-five rounded up to five,” Adam said.

I turned enough to stare at both of them in disbelief, pretending I didn’t get the reference. “Come again?”

Adam snorted. “That’s what she said.”

“I didn’t have to. It happened regardless.” Brooke blushed. “But *anyway*, your story. It’s got good structure. Probably a decent narrator voice, though it didn’t last long enough to be sure. It’s plausible, but light on details and world-building. I give it a six.”

I pushed out a growl. “We can’t all have tragic backstories.” Sure, there was more to my being here than what I’d offered, but it wasn’t Pulitzer winning stuff, or whatever kinds of awards they gave for people talking about their pasts. Besides, summoning some of those memories left an ache inside that I would rather not dive into.

“Do you have any backstory?” Adam asked. “Baby Deacon just appeared out of nowhere one day and *bam* he was a smooth as fuck, all around great guy who knew everything about antiques and was destined for the shop he grew up in?”

Not quite. “Close enough.” My story drew some parallels to Adam’s, but I still wasn’t in the mood to dive into it.

“Come on, you know my tale. You know Brooke’s.” Adam’s voice was cajoling.

The past hammered in my skull, roaring to be released from the box it sat locked in ninety-nine percent of the time. “And I’m grateful that you trusted me enough to share.”

“Tit-for-tat,” Adam said. “At least a hint.”

“*Drop it.*” The words came out harsher than I intended.

Adam clamped his jaw shut, and shock splashed across Brooke’s face. I breathed deeply through my nostrils, clawing to lock away the memories again.

brooke

I WANTED to hear Deacon's story, but it was impossible to miss the edge in his voice.

"It's late. We should get some sleep." Deacon's tone flattened and he stood.

"I'll go sleep on the couch." Adam started to climb from the bed.

Just because they were younger than me didn't mean they could act like children. I grabbed Adam's wrist and gripped tight. "It's going to get cold in here tonight, and that's why we're all in here to begin with. We all just had sex a few hours ago, so it's not like we haven't gotten up close and personal with each other. Get your butts back in the bed."

"Kind of sexy when you say it like that." Adam settled in next to me again.

Deacon stayed as well. "We're supposed to keep an eye on you after all."

"Better."

The silence that settled in was a billion times more awkward than being naked on all fours in front of two men had been. I searched my brain for something neutral to try to get them talking again. *Oh*. "What are the candles for?" I had a

nagging suspicion in the back of my mind thanks to a conversation with Carly, but I didn't want to assume.

“Lighting the room,” Deacon said.

“Looking pretty,” Adam added.

That couldn't be the entire answer. Not with the look they shared when Adam pulled the candles out. “So Adam has a full stash of gorgeous unscented candles, an entire rainbow, that he just happens to keep hidden away?”

Adam's smirk was telling. “I was a good Boy Scout.”

“I like a man in uniform.” Deacon leaned forward to look Adam over. “Probably not that one, but...”

This was so much better than the tension a few minutes ago. “Now tell me the real reason.”

The men exchanged looks, and Deacon shook his head with a faint frown.

Like I wasn't going to notice? I gave my full attention to Adam—they were his candles, after all, and he seemed more likely to open up about almost anything than Deacon.

His smile was endearingly sheepish. “Yeah, yeah. Not like I can tell you *no*.” He picked up one of the candles. “Hold out your arm, with the inside facing up.”

I was far too curious to do anything but comply.

He grabbed my wrist with his free hand, his grip tight. The instant he tipped the candle, my impulse was to jerk out of his touch, but fascination won out. He drizzled hot wax in a lazy serpentine along my skin.

I sucked in a sharp breath through my teeth at the burn, but the pain wasn't as intense as I expected. It was also kind of hot

in other ways. The kind of ways that coiled in my belly and traveled lower.

He let me go, and I twisted my arm this way and that, examining the simple but lovely pattern. “This is what they’re for? It’s pretty.”

“Once you’re stripped down”—Adam set the candle down—“they’re for covering your body with artwork.”

When Carly had explained wax play, it didn’t sound so great, but the way Adam watched me, and the lingering sting on my skin made a pulse throb between my thighs. “So, it’s a sex thing?” I asked.

Adam brushed my hair from my check and hovered his mouth near my ear. His hot breath brushed my cheek. “You tell me. Do you think you could get off after something like that?”

“Maybe.” With the shivers of anticipation spilling through me, I wondered if I could get off just thinking about it.

“Do you want to try?” Deacon asked.

“So very much.” I snapped my jaw shut. Did I just say that out loud?

Adam smirked. “After the power’s back on, and we have control over things like the temperature of the running water.” He peeled away the wax, leaving a faint red mark on my skin, but no real damage.

Deacon pressed his lips softly to the faint burn. “It looked like it needed kissing better.”

“I think I need more of that. Kissing my boo boos better.” When did I get this kind of bold? What had these men done to me?

Deacon looked contemplative. “You did just sprain your ankle.”

“And as we’ve already discussed, we are supposed to take care of you,” Adam said.

“But you’re supposed to keep your ankle elevated, and we probably shouldn’t get too naked. What with the cold and all.” Deacon gestured vaguely.

Adam rested his palm on my cheek and turned my face to his. “Lucky for you, we’re good at improvising.”

His kiss went from a gentle mouth on mine to hard in an instant. He nipped my lips and swallowed my groans and kissed a hungry path along my jaw and down my neck, sucking on the soft skin as he went. The way he yanked my hair when he slid his hand to the back of my head and tightened his grip was delicious.

This must be what it felt like to be claimed.

Deacon shoved my sweater up, catching my bra on the way and pushing it over my breasts.

“I don’t think those need to be kissed better,” I teased.

He pressed his lips to the shell of my ear. “Best to not take any chances.”

I couldn’t argue that, especially with the heat of his palms on my skin and the delicious sting when he rolled my nipples between his fingers.

Adam undid my jeans with an efficiency I wasn’t sure I’d mastered, and slipped his hand under the denim and over the cotton of my panties. He pressed in enough to entice and make me squirm while he sucked on the sensitive skin where my shoulder met my neck.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a hickey, but that hardly seemed to matter right now. Especially the way their attention had me squirming and clenching my thighs together.

"I want to taste you," Adam murmured against my shoulder.

I liked the way he said it, but I wasn't sure where he'd go from here. "You've had your mouth all over me."

"Not all over." He pressed his fingers harder against my panties above my opening.

A rush of anticipation flooded me as his meaning, and stupid logic followed on its heels. "I haven't showered or anything since before..."

Adam moved his mouth back to mine, his lips hovering millimeters from my skin. "I don't care." His whisper—his meaning—was as tantalizing as his touch.

Deacon kept up a light session of pinching and kissing while Adam helped me slide out of my bottoms. Adam was gentle every step of the way, making sure not to jar my foot or even disturb the bandage.

And then he was kissing up the inside of my thigh. When he dragged his tongue over my slick skin, I jerked into the incredible sensation. I lost track of where one lick ended and the next started, and when he slid a finger inside me, I was pretty sure I cried out

Deacon moved his mouth to my breasts, and sucking replaced pinching.

There were so many points of contact, it was as if a cord ran from each touch, all to a central point behind the throbbing button Adam was licking like a Tootsie Roll pop.

I fisted the sheets, needing something to ground myself. It didn't matter. Pleasure spilled through me, pushing me into orgasm and tearing ecstasy from my throat.

When they finally eased off, I sank into the bed, panting.

Deacon leaned past my shoulder and Adam raised his head, and they crushed their mouths together, my juices still glistening on Adam's face.

Hot. Holy Hellfire, that was scorching even.

And it made me wonder, "What would the two of you be doing if I wasn't here?"

"Sleeping," Deacon said.

Adam pouted. "Not giving you kisses to help you feel better."

"What he said." Deacon pointed at him. "His answer is way better than mine."

I laughed through my short breath. This was enticing and sexy and the orgasms... *wow*. And it was fun, too. "What if I wasn't here and the two of you were"—I hesitated, then felt dumb for letting such a simple word stall me given Adam just had his face up close and personal with my vagina—"horny."

Adam furrowed his brow. "So in this fictional scenario of yours, we both want to get off," he pointed at Deacon and then himself, "But you're nowhere to be found."

"That's the question, yes."

Deacon stood, strolled to the other side of the bed, gripped Adam's shirt and kissed him hard.

Their groans were delicious. I'd turned down Carly's MM books in the past because the thrill for me was imagining

myself in the woman's place in any story, but watching this was a brand new level of yum.

I swore I could see the sparks between them and feel the pent-up frustration wrapping around them as it was released. The way one of them would shift his weight to take control of the kiss, then the other would turn to biting, each of them one-upping the exchange, was a distinct power struggle. But passion and need lay under it all.

It was all just. So. Hot.

And then they were both standing, shoving clothes out of the way without undressing. Shirts went up and pants hung off hips and the temperature in the room cranked up several degrees.

Was I allowed to touch myself while I watched them? I hoped so, because I was going to.

deacon

I NEEDED to lose myself in the physical—in Adam’s rough touch and Brooke’s soft sighs—and not lose myself in a jumble of thoughts from the past that tried to shove their way into my mind.

I dug my fingers into Adam’s arms and gripped just as tightly to images of him going down on Brooke. The way she tasted on his lips after. The fact that she was going home in the morning and probably putting an end to lessons soon.

Nope. I wasn’t dwelling on that last one.

The only thing that mattered right now was how hard I was. The sting that tugged my cock every time Adam bit me. His hand wrapped around my shaft as he jerked hard and fast. His grip was almost too much. *Almost*.

And the sounds Brooke made as she watched us. Seeing her dip her fingers into her pussy, her gaze never straying. She was stunning. Intoxicating.

Adam stroked me until I was grunting. Until I fucked his hand with heady desperation, wondering if I should pull away, but needing more at the same time.

Desire built inside, tightening in my balls. My eyelids fluttered, stars dancing in my vision, and my world swam. I

came hard, jerking against Adam's touch, covering his hand and my jeans in a sticky white mess. My legs wobbled from the exertion. From the release.

I didn't have to worry about standing when Adam pushed me to my knees. I dragged his zipper down with my teeth, and Brooke's giggle-groan was pure delight.

Adam fisted his cock and pressed the head roughly to my lips, and I took him into my mouth. No one else could do this to me besides him. No one else turned me on by taking the lead. I was the one in control.

Unless I was with Adam.

He fucked my face, pushing deep, grunting as hard as he thrust.

I licked and sucked and fingered his sac, falling into the heady sensation of post-orgasm bliss combined with knowing how much he was enjoying this. I was barely aware of the sounds he made becoming harder. More punctuated. I was lost in the way he tightened his grip on the short strands of my hair.

Brooke let out a series of loud gasps that told me she was coming again. *Fuck* I liked that sound, and after this, it would haunt my most vivid dreams.

When the first salty spurt from Adam hit the back of my mouth, I swallowed greedily, letting him spill down my throat until he was spent.

As he slid from my mouth, he sank onto the edge of the bed with a low groan and I sank back on my heels.

Silence rang loudly in the room, amplified by the still from outside. The flicker of candles and the occasional crack of

flame from the other room added to the almost otherworldly feeling around us.

Maybe *this* was a vivid dream. It almost felt like one. Potent and alluring and the kind of thing that would suck me in and keep me here until I didn't want anything else.

I shook the thought aside and stood abruptly. "I need a change of clothes. I'll bring you something too, Brooke."

"I'll figure out the best way to clean us up." Adam stood, spun, and kissed Brooke on the forehead. "Don't move."

She raised her brows, and I nearly choked on the envy as I swallowed it back.

Adam and I left and returned about the same time. His faint smirk was hard to miss when he pressed a washcloth to Brooke's skin and she squealed.

"It's cold." She laughed.

"No hot water." Adam shrugged. "We'll keep you warm, I promise."

When he was done. I helped Brooke slide into a pair of my sweats, and the three of us were soon cuddled together under the blanket again.

"What did you think of tonight's bonus lesson?" I barely hid my wince as the question passed my lips. It tasted like a foul thing to ask, but I needed to cement for myself what I was doing here.

Brooke's expression flickered, but returned to neutral in a blink, but Adam's scowl stayed fixed in place.

"It was good. Thank you." Brooke sounded like she was taking about dinner and not sex.

I wanted to take back the words and explain.

That was post coital bliss doing the thinking for me. A good night's sleep, and I'd be fine in the morning.

I WASN'T SURPRISED to find Adam and Brooke gone the next morning, but it was nice hearing their voices drift into the bedroom. Nicer even than hearing the sizzle of the radiator and feeling the heat in the room. Power was back on.

I wandered into the kitchen to find Brooke in one chair with her foot propped up on another, and Adam making breakfast. It was so normal and domestic and heartwarming and I refused to let it lull me into any false sense of belief that what was going on with me and them was anything other than sex and friendship.

We exchanged generic *good morning* greetings while I grabbed some coffee and took a seat across from Brooke at the table.

"Power's hooked up in the basement," she said. "You're free to do whatever you need down there."

"You shouldn't have gone down there." My retort came out as more of a grumble.

She scowled. "You're welcome."

"I tried to tell her *no*." Adam set a plate in front of me with pancakes and eggs. "She's very persuasive when she wants to be."

Images flashed in my mind of all the ways Brooke could *persuade* Adam, and I clenched my jaw.

Brooke started to stand, and Adam nudged her back into her seat. He took her empty plate to the sink and rinsed it.

This was too sweet. Too wrong.

“I was careful and he was the perfect escort.” A soft smile played on Brooke’s face.

Jealousy surged inside, and I swallowed it. Did I wake up on the wrong fucking side of the bed or what?

Adam joined us at the table, his own coffee in hand. “Roads are plowed. I’m going to take Brooke to the clinic so they can check out her ankle, then drop her off at home.”

Brooke should stay here. I squashed the impulse to spit out the words. To follow them with *We’ll take care of you.* She needed to go home to her actual family. ”Sounds good.”

“So, thank you for last night. All of it.” Brooke’s voice grew softer.

I gave her a smile that didn’t feel real on any level. “Of course. What are friends for?”

That seemed to be enough to kill the breakfast conversation. A short while later, Adam helped Brooke downstairs, and they were on their way.

My pancakes tasted like sawdust. Weird, because Adam was usually a great cook. I cleaned up after myself and headed down to the shop to work. Both of my employees had called in, due to bad weather conditions, but I didn’t expect many customers, for the same reason, so it wasn’t a big deal.

I returned a few calls about the furniture people saw on Adam’s channel, and since I had to keep an eye on the shop, I settled in to wait.

When the *Adam's Family* chime rang through the store, I stood. The *interested* look I adopted faded to a scowl when I saw Travis strolling toward me. "What can I do for you?" I clipped off the words.

"I heard you've been doing some electrical wiring in a basement you aren't supposed to have."

I wasn't going to take any chances with the nuance in his words. "*I* wasn't. I had a licensed electrician do it. And since the basement is original to the building, I can't *unhave* it."

"If by licensed, you mean Brooke, is her work the reason the power went out on the whole block last night?"

I clenched my fists as suppressed frustration from this morning rushed back in the form of fury. Could I get away with it if I threw a punch? "The power went out because the transformer blew. Same one that dies in a noisy *bang* every six months or so. Brooke is more competent at her work than anyone I know. Get out or I'll make you."

"I didn't say what I came to say."

"I don't care." Maybe I should—he had a lot of say about what happened to this block—but fuck him. "This is still my shop and still private property. If you want to tell me something, send an email."

Travis shrugged. "Probably safer for me anyway, but you'll wish you heard me out when you read it." He turned and walked toward the door.

Adam was coming back as he was leaving, and jarred Travis with his shoulder on the way past.

Childish? Without question. Did I laugh anyway? Without question.

“What’s The Tool want?” Adam asked when he reached the counter.

“Don’t know, don’t care. How’s Brooke?”

“She has to stay off her feet for at least two weeks and she’s not happy about it.” Adam didn’t look happy either.

I was disappointed, but this was as good a time as any to remind myself of the rules I’d set on our relationship. Brooke was a friend I was giving lessons to. If the teacher couldn’t practice what he preached, what good was he as a teacher? “She has to do what she has to do.”

A frown whispered across Adam’s face.

“We should check with some other people on the block, see if they can help us while she’s out of commission,” I said.

“Good idea.” This time Adam’s frown lingered. “Brooke did say—more than once—that we should visit and keep her updated, so she didn’t get lonely.”

I wasn’t sure that was smart, but if we weren’t having sex, I’d go see her as a friend. “Okay.”

Adam’s sigh almost sounded like a growl.

I wasn’t going to ask why, because I wasn’t sure I had a retort to whatever was bothering him. “Do you mind working today?” I asked instead. “I want to do a full inventory of the basement, now that we have power.”

Adam’s *sure* was as unenthusiastic as anything I’d ever heard, but he settled onto the stool behind the register.

I headed into the basement. A light switch sat at the bottom of the stairs, and when I flicked it, the entire space lit up. Brooke was good. I spent the next several hours cataloging

everything, moving as much of it as I could into some semblance of order while I worked.

Was antique sex furniture subject to the same zoning laws as adult toys? There was what we'd told Travis, and then there was the reality and I had no idea if I could actually sell this stuff. I hoped so.

My phone chimed with a new email from Travis, and I ignored it.

About fifteen minutes later a text from Aubrey came through. *What the fuck is he thinking?*

This couldn't be good.

It was followed quickly by one from Adam. *You should get up here.*

Nope. Not good at all.

I made my way back to the main shop, to find that Aubrey, Sebastian, and others from the block had gathered around the counter by Adam. They were all talking over each other and the general tone in the room felt like panic mixed with fury.

Maybe I should've read the message from Travis. "What's going on?"

"Mr. Paddock"—Sebastian said Travis name with poisonous disdain—"is pushing through zoning regulations about wiring. That all of the buildings have to be brought up to modern code."

"He can't do that." I should know by now that Travis could do a lot more than seemed legal. He had too many connections to the people with money and who made the decisions.

Aubrey scowled. "Well guess what. He is."

adam

IT HAD ONLY BEEN a few days since Brooke stopped by, barely more than a weekend, but her absence was tangible. I filled some of the time by filming Sebastian's shop and posting the video.

A few friends on the street were happy to help us finish the basement build-out, but scheduling difficulties meant that wasn't happening for another week. We'd decided to make it an anti-Valentine's Sunday, the day before the holiday.

By Tuesday afternoon, I was fidgety and looking for something new to fill my time. Deacon and I were sitting in the back room of the shop, having finished getting video of most of the furniture in his basement.

"We should visit Brooke." The words popped out of my mouth before I registered what they meant.

Deacon looked surprised. "And do what?"

"Say *hi*. See if she needs anything. Hang out for a bit."

"She'd call if she needed anything. Or send one of her kids. And when in the history of ever have we just *hung out*?"

That didn't mean we couldn't start. "Dylan is working. Dean will be in in an hour to help. Let's go."

“Dean is coming in because I have a lot to do.” Deacon waved me off. “Admin shit. If you want to go, I’m not stopping you.”

But Brooke is your friend. The odd protest lodged in my brain. I saw her as at least a friend at this point, and as much as I tried not to, I was hoping for more than that. “Fine. Go do your *admin shit*. I’ll see you later.”

Deacon scowled, but he didn’t stop me.

As I walked to my car, I called Brooke. When she answered, her voice made me smile, even saying something as simple as *hello*.

“Hey. You busy?” I asked.

“Super, super busy. I’m training for a marathon, and after that I thought I’d go rock climbing.” Her reply was playful.

“That sounds super fun. But how about instead I bring over some pizza and keep you company while you *don’t* do those things.”

“You expect me to drop my busy afternoon for you?”

“And pizza. Extra sausage.”

Brooke laughed. “I don’t know if that’s innuendo or if you’re serious.”

“I never joke about pizza. As for the sausage... All depends on how the day goes.”

“I’d love some company. The pizza sounds good too, but isn’t necessary.”

“I’ll be there in less than thirty.” As I disconnected and climbed into my car, I was grinning. How did such a simple exchange brighten my day this way?

When I got to Brooke's, pizza in hand, a goofy giddiness was racing through me. I felt like a teenager on a first date.

In some ways, the anticipation felt wrong. I'd watched Deacon lust after her for years, but never act on it. He'd made it more than clear that he didn't intend to—not at a romantic level—so was there really an issue with me seeing if Brooke was interested?

I had no idea. Were there rules in a case like this? Did I care?

I rang the bell, and it chirped in response.

“Come on in.” Brooke's voice seemed to filter from nowhere.

I pushed inside the house to find her on the couch, her foot propped up on pillows and her phone in hand.

“New doorbell?” I asked.

“Paige and Bryan decided I needed a remote control one with a camera, if I was going to be home alone and immobile for two weeks.”

That was cool. “Super smart.”

“Especially since they've been asking to install one for a while now, and this gave them the excuse they needed.” Brooke scooted into a sitting position.

I moved the pillows under her leg to rest at her new spot. “I would've taken the chance too if I were them.”

She shook her head. “Don't tell them that. If I let them have their way, my entire house would be *smart*. I don't need my fridge to know more about its contents than I do.”

“A problem easily solved by storing nothing but condiments, beer, and enough milk for cereal and coffee. Do you want this now or later?” I held up the pizza box.

“You’re such a bachelor,” Brooke teased. “Or rather, you put up a good front. I know what the contents of Deacon’s fridge were pre- and post-Adam. And I would love some pizza now. I don’t know if it’s good or bad that Paige hasn’t built me a robot yet to make me lunch.”

“You don’t need a robot, you’ve got me. Multipurpose, I don’t need batteries, and I vibrate at infinite frequencies.”

Brooke’s laugh was light. “I’ll have to try out some other settings when I’m up to it.”

Fuck yes she would. “Don’t go anywhere.”

She raised her brows.

I vanished into the kitchen long enough to find plates and grab us each a few slices of pizza. “I really am happy to bring you lunch every day,” I said when I returned to the living room.

“I’m not sure if that’s innuendo or not.” She took a plate from me.

I sat on the couch near her feet. “It wasn’t, but only because I need you to recover as quickly as possible, so it can be.” Reservations or not, apparently I was all-in on this flirting-with-Brooke thing.

And the pink on her cheeks that colored her smile implied she didn’t mind. “I’m going to have a hard time turning down an offer like that.”

“Then it’s a date. Or a dozen of them.” I grinned.

We spent the afternoon talking, until her kids got home from school.

“Ooh, did you come over to help me with my bike?” Paige asked.

I glanced at Brooke.

“He came over to bring me pizza,” she said.

Bryan huffed. “And we had to eat school food?”

“You were excited this morning that it was Taco Tuesday. *We don’t need extra money for lunch, Mom.*” Brooke’s voice deepened in what I assumed was a Bryan impersonation. “*We’ll have tacos for lunch, Mom.*”

Paige rolled her eyes. “That you think for even a moment that school lunch tacos are on the same level as Gia’s Deep Dish makes me wonder if you’re the same woman who raised us.”

“There are leftovers in the fridge.” I gestured toward the kitchen, then glanced at Brooke. “Unless that’s going to ruin their dinner?” I didn’t want to step on any toes.

Brooke twisted her mouth. “I’m not sure if you remember being seventeen, but it takes a lot more than a slice or two of pizza to ruin their appetites.”

Her kids cheered, vanished into the kitchen, and returned before Brooke and I could restart our conversation.

“Okay, we’re stealing Adam now.” Paige took a bite out of the slice in her hand.

“Only if Adam agrees, and don’t you want to heat that up first?” Brooke asked.

Bryan shook his head. “Takes too long.”

I gave Brooke's good leg a gentle squeeze. "I did promise to help Paige with her bike. I'll be back."

"Remember he's doing you a favor. Be nice." Brooke looked at her kids.

Bryan snorted. "We're always angels, just like our mom raised us to be."

Brooke rolled her eyes and waved us outside.

I followed Paige and Bryan, but instead of steering us toward the garage where I thought she did most of her work, they led me to a barn behind the house.

"It's my understanding this place is off limits." I did *not* want to be put in the position of *to narc or not to narc*.

"Pft." Bryan glanced over his shoulder at me. "Because Mom is afraid of creepy crawlies."

"And barns falling on her kids." Look at me, being an adult and shit.

Paige stopped a few feet from the doors. "The barn is structurally sound, but before we show you what's inside, you have to promise, swear on your fucking life, to not tell Mom."

"No can do." I shook my head.

Paige sighed. "What if I promise you first that it's not illegal or dangerous? Please? It's a surprise. We will tell Mom, just not until it's done."

How was I supposed to be the wet blanket over a surprise? "My definition might be different than yours. But as long as it's not going to get anyone hurt or arrested, I won't tell."

"Okay." Paige and Bryan opened the doors enough to let us in, then closed them behind us, encasing us in darkness.

“Light,” she said.

A series of bright, bare bulbs flickered on a few feet away, temporarily blinding me. When I blinked away the brightness, I was looking at a tarp over something large. But it was a new tarp, not something that had been sitting back here for decades, and tools were set up on stands around it.

Paige grabbed one side of the tarp and Bryan the other.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked. “You’re not ready, but do you think you’re ready?”

He was right—I didn’t know if I was ready. “Sure.”

They yanked the tarp away to reveal a small, World War I tank. “Holy shit.” I recognized it instantly, because there was an ancient photograph of it tucked away in Deacon’s shop, with the old owner standing proudly next to it. “Pretty sure *tank* falls under the category of *could kill you*. Why do you have a tank?”

“It came with the house,” Paige said.

Bryan nodded. “And it’s only going to kill you if you put ammo in it. It’s not really big enough to run things over.”

“No more than Deacon’s truck,” Paige added.

It was a *small* tank, all things considered. “What are you doing with it? And what about your bike, Paige?”

She ducked her head. “My bike is fine. It was a ruse to get you back here. We need an adult for some things, and also some knowledge I don’t have.”

“I don’t know anything about tanks except that they go *boom*.”

“But you’ve got an instinct for it, like Paige does,” Bryan said.

Page handed me a clipboard. “I’m fixing it up for a final grade in one of my classes, and I’m going to use it to get an apprenticeship after I graduate. You have to keep it a secret and help us. *Please.*”

How was I supposed to refuse an offer like that? I was about to work on a fucking tank. “All right. I’m in.”

We spent the next few hours going through what they’d already done and figuring out what next steps were. When Brooke texted Paige to remind her it was her turn to make dinner, we had a good idea of where we were going next.

“You should stay for dinner,” Bryan said as we headed toward the house.

I wished I could. Was that crossing a line? “I’m working at Deacon’s tonight. I need to get back.”

Both teenagers frowned. “Okay, but come back tomorrow.”

The next few days went a lot the same—I’d stop by with lunch, spend time talking to Brooke, then go help Paige and Bryan in the barn after school. Wednesday, Brooke’s feet were in my lap instead of a pile of cushions between us, and by Friday, I was sitting behind her, propping her up, tempted to pull her into my lap.

Fuck it.

I gripped her chin to tilt her face to mine, and brushed my lips over hers. The air sparked between us, ignited by her gasp fading to a sigh.

She twisted her body, turning toward me and kneeling without breaking the kiss.

This was soothing chaos—calming my soul but making my pulse race—and I needed more. I slid my hand to the back of her neck, gripping tight and holding her captive. Licking along the seam of her lips then thrusting my tongue into her mouth. Swallowing her moans. Devouring her.

It was tempting to completely let go of my restraint and push into things hard and fast, but there was pain for pleasure and then there was re-injuring her ankle so she was stuck like this even longer. I didn't want any version of the second option.

Brooke traced along my chest, teasing with a light touch as she outlined each contour she came to.

Dude. Deacon's voice barked in my thoughts, jarring me out of the moment. As I leaned back, reality rushed in around us, putting up an invisible barrier.

“What's wrong?” Brooke asked.

I was hard as a rock, I wanted desperately to pin her on her back and fuck her until she screamed with pleasure, and I had a two second loop of Deacon interrupting stuck in my mind. “I can't.”

“Can't what? Kiss me? You were doing an incredible job.” Hurt slid into Brooke's voice.

“I just... Deacon—”

“Isn't here. He has nothing to do with this.”

But didn't he? Something told me that wasn't the right thing to ask.

Brooke scowled and scooted away. “He’s made it crystal clear how he sees his relationship with both of us. I was never *with* him and supposedly neither were you. Anything that happens between you and me should be between you and me.”

On the one hand she had a good point, but...

“Or is this bro’s before hoes?” Brooke spat out the question.

“No.” At least I knew that answer. “That’s not... You’re not... *No*.”

She scrubbed her face. “I think you should go.”

“Because I won’t make out with you?” Stupid, Adam. Stupid. Stupid.

Brooke growled. “Because our invisible friend’s presence is apparently more potent than whatever we were just doing.”

If I took it back, I could stay. We could talk. More.

And I’d feel guilty. “I’ll be back tomorrow with lunch.”

“No. It’s Saturday. I’ve got things covered. You don’t need to come back next week, either.”

“Right.” I walked out of the farmhouse. The conversation played on repeat in my mind the whole drive back to Deacon’s, but I wasn’t any closer to knowing what the right choice was when I arrived.

brooke

I WAS STILL TRYING to process what happened with Adam when the twins got home.

“Are you the only one here?” Bryan asked when they walked in the front door.

Your mother made a bad judgment call and now your friend isn't coming back. I'd have to work on that answer. “You were expecting someone else?”

“Adam,” Paige said. “To help us.”

Three days and he was part of their lives. I should be grateful I'd never tried to date before now. Not that Adam and I ever made it to the dating. This was so messed up. “Maybe next week.”

They both shrugged, made sure I was set, and then they were off doing their own thing again.

I felt like I should be able to shrug things off as easily as they just had, but here I was asking myself if it was me.

I shrugged off the cloud enough to give my family my attention through the evening and into the next day, but the self-doubt and questions lingered in the back of my mind.

Saturday was the day of the high school Sweetheart's dance. As noon crept up and then rushed past, I felt an empty pit in my chest at the realization I wouldn't have Adam's company today.

Or Deacon's, since he seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth since I hurt my ankle.

Fortunately, distractions were on the way. Carly arrived a little after two, to help Paige and Jamie with their hair, and Daria came with her so we could all hang out and ooh and ahh over my babies going to one of their last dances before they graduated.

Bryan grumped around the house through most of the makeover process, grumbling about *girls*, but as soon as Aubrey showed up with their outfits, to make sure the three of them were all wearing things right, he was all over getting into his suit.

I wasn't sure if his excitement was about the suit or Aubrey. Hopefully it wasn't the latter—I wasn't prepared to deal with my teenage boy falling for a woman in her thirties.

While the kids were getting dressed and Carly and Daria were taking care of other things, Aubrey approached me. "Can I ask you something?" Her voice was quiet.

"Sure."

"You and Deacon..."

Oh. *Oh*. My answer lodged in my throat, carried on the doubt of the last day. "We're just friends." I'd waited too long to say it—it didn't sound believable.

She fiddled with her watch, sliding it up and down her arm. "Are you sure?"

“Absolutely positive.” I managed to sound convincing this time, and Deacon had driven home over and over how much *just friends* we were.

“I can’t figure out the fringes.” Paige flounced into the room, interrupting the conversation.

Aubrey moved away from me to help Paige, Jamie, and Bryan. She stayed on hand while I took a billion pictures, and left when the kids did.

“I’m looking forward to dress shopping with Alana when she’s old enough for dances,” Daria said. “But I am *not* looking forward to the drama and the boys.”

Carly pulled three hard lemonades from the fridge. “Make your men deal with the boys.”

Daria took a bottle from her and twisted off the top. “Tanner might invite them to watch movies with us.”

“If Colin likes them, you know you’re safe.” I had a pretty high opinion of my younger brother. “Problem solved.”

Daria snorted a laugh and helped me hobble back to the couch. “You’re lucky yours are still angels at seventeen.” She handed me my drink.

“They’re not angels. They’re smart little demons who are lovable enough to get away with it.” Though, I really was lucky my kids were as good as they were.

“So are cats,” Carly said. “I’d rather have the cats.”

I took a sip of something that was distinctly lemon plus alcohol. Being raised religiously, I hadn’t taken my first drink until I was in my thirties, and I didn’t drink much now. But every once in a while, especially with friends I trusted, I liked

to indulge a little. “You can’t tell me you’re not a little awed by seeing them in their dance clothes tonight.”

“I won’t deny that—they were adorable.” Carly conceded. “The thing is—they’re your problem at the end of the night, not mine.”

Daria laughed. “You’re so jaded.”

“And you love me anyway, bitch. Enough about kids. I want to know what turned Brooke to the dark side.” Carly looked at me.

I stared back, not comprehending. She wasn’t talking about my *lessons* with Deacon and Adam, because no one knew about those. Unless it was actually obvious. Was there some sort of mark on me that said *I’ve gotten laid for the first time in more than a decade*? No. “The dark side?”

“Wanting more books with spanking. *Other things*, I believe is how you put it.”

Daria leaned in, eyes wide. “*Really*. I thought you were content with keeping the details sparse and the sex vanilla.”

Was I blushing? I had to be with how hot my face was. “I got curious.”

“Just like that?” Carly asked.

“I might have had a little help.” Was I allowed to talk about this? Both women were familiar with casual sex—I’d heard Carly’s stories especially—so it didn’t seem like they’d judge me. But this wasn’t just my story.

Daria took a long swallow of her drink. “Spill. We need to know.”

“You don’t even have to share all the dirty details. Who is he? Did you get yourself a young stud or two like Daria has?”

Carly set her bottle aside and leaned in, elbows on her knees.

I wasn't sure how comfortable I was hearing my brother as a *young stud*. "It's not like that."

"Not like what?" Daria prodded.

"I just have a friend or two helping me figure out what dating might be like." There. That was the truth. Mostly.

Daria made a *tsk* sound. "Which is why you're blushing furiously. You can't turn back now that you've opened up this forum of curiosity. We need information."

I really did want to share with *someone*. "So, Deacon is giving me lessons in casual sex, and Adam may have been there a time or two as well."

"A time or two implies more than two times. Wait. Deacon? With the..." Daria gestured at her arms.

I could guess what she meant. "The tattoos. Yes."

"Give me your hands." Carly held out both of hers.

We each did the same. She grabbed our wrists and licked our palms.

"The fuck?" Daria scrubbed her hand on her jeans.

I mimicked the gesture.

"The two of you obviously have some kind of *two men at once* mojo. I need me some of that," Carly said.

Except now I had *no men* mojo, because one of them didn't want more and the other was his best friend. Apparently there were different types of lonely, and sleeping with a man who only wanted sex was a type I didn't care for at all.

I shook the thought aside. "You're going back to Italy next month, aren't you?" I asked Carly.

She wrinkled her nose. “No. I had to push Italy back, but I might be hitting up Birmingham.”

“You said Birmingham and not Buckingham, right? No castles in your near future?”

“Not for her.” Daria shook her head. “But maybe a few gators.”

We were still talking and joking a few hours later, when I heard a car in the driveway. It was too early for the kids to be back. Did I dare hope it was Adam? Would I send my friends away if it was? Screw that—he chose to walk out, he could come back to—

The door slammed open and Bryan stormed through. He headed straight for the stairs, and anger spilled from him.

Paige wasn't far behind. “It's not my fault. I didn't know.” Her voice was raw.

Bryan slammed his bedroom door in response.

“Fuck you too.” Paige screamed and stormed into her own room.

I sighed.

“What were you saying about demons?” Carly's voice was sympathetic.

“Do you want help? Can we do anything?” Daria asked.

I shook my head. “I've got this, but thank you.”

But as Carly and Daria left, I wasn't sure that I had anything under control.

deacon

WHEN ADAM CAME BACK from Brooke's in a foul mood, I tried to ignore the ember of smugness inside. He wouldn't talk about what happened, which wasn't unusual. His refusal to smile was strange, though.

I wasn't going to push the issue.

Saturday he was in his room most of the day editing video of the furniture in the basement. I knew because he sent me clips every so often to check out and approve. Proof he was fine.

Sunday morning he was quiet, but the foul mood was gone as he and I got ready for some of our friends from the block to help us with prepping the basement to be usable as a sales floor. It was weird that Brooke wouldn't be here, and even more unusual that I hadn't seen her all week. Obviously I wouldn't, since she was staying off her feet, but I missed her company.

Which, of course I did—she was a good friend.

Sebastian brought pastries from the bakery down the street, with an apology from the owner for not being here. I didn't expect them to be. Sundays were huge for the bakery, even though most of the stores on the block were closed today.

Evie, who owned the hardware store, showed up with coffee. It was a universally accepted fact that she made the best coffee. Aubrey brought iced tea for later, which she stored in my fridge.

Sebastian wrinkled his nose when she told us what it was.

“Since when are you a tea snob?” Aubrey asked.

“Since I learned what real tea tasted like.”

Evie made a sound like *pft*. “Give a guy a store and suddenly he’s a fucking expert.”

“Yes.” Sebastian’s tone said *obviously*. “Like none of you know your shit?”

Adam cringed and stuck out his tongue. “Not personally. Gross, dude.”

Evie made a gagging noise and Aubrey threw a pair of work gloves at him.

Adam was back to normal.

We snacked on pastries while Adam explained the plan for the day. Furniture would be pushed to the very middle of the room and covered. We’d buff out the stone floor and cover the wires Brooke put in place.

Something pinged in my chest at her name. Strange.

Evie and Adam got to work on making sure the molding would cover the wiring, while Sebastian, Aubrey and I rearranged furniture.

Sebastian stepped away to take a call.

“How’s Brooke doing?” Aubrey asked. “How’s her ankle?”

What? “Weren’t you over there yesterday?” There weren’t a lot of secrets on Main Street. Besides, Aubrey told me a few days ago that she was helping Brooke’s twins with their outfits for the dance.

Aubrey shrugged. “Oh. Yeah.”

“You’re being weird,” I said.

Sebastian returned, and Aubrey didn’t say anything.

“Aubrey?” I prodded.

“Nothing. I’m fine. Nothing.”

Sebastian looked between us. “Did I interrupt? Do you want me to come back?”

“Would you?” Aubrey’s voice was instantly playful.

I wasn’t in the mood for, well, abrupt mood shifts. “Don’t go.” I grabbed Sebastian’s arm. “I can talk about how much I want you while you’re here.”

“You couldn’t handle me.” Sebastian tugged away and went back to work.

I snorted. “Okay. Keep telling yourself that.”

He sighed heavily and gazed at some point in the distance. “I have to.” His tone was wistful. “It’s the only way I can sleep in my big, lonely bed at night.”

“Oh. Is Rachel out of commission again?” Aubrey asked sweetly.

Sebastian’s pout was exaggerated. “I had to special order a puncture kit, because *Evie doesn’t carry them.*” He raised his voice at the end of his statement.

“What?” Evie looked up from across the room. “If I don’t carry it, you don’t need it. Don’t blame me because you poked

one too many holes in your blow-up doll.”

A glance around the room showed I wasn't the only one shocked she had the perfect response on hand.

“How did you know what they were talking about?” Adam asked.

“I'm psychic.” Evie tossed out casually. “Or smart. Or a good guesser. Take your pick.”

God, I loved this block.

We went back to work, Evie's router creating too much noise for much conversation. When Adam called for another set of hands to hang the next section of trim, Sebastian joined them.

Aubrey and I moved further away, out of everyone else's view, to move more furniture.

“You and Brooke... Have things changed between you?” Aubrey's soft question startled me.

Why? Did she say something? I shook the thought aside. “Nope. We're still good friends.”

“You're sure.”

“You've already asked her. What did she say?” I couldn't help it. I needed to know.

“Same thing.”

I felt the answer like a stone in my chest, but what else was Brooke supposed to say? “See? Just friends.”

“So what if you had a friend who wanted to be more?” Aubrey asked.

I stopped pushing the vanity I was moving. Would I go for it if Brooke wanted more? The thought didn't sit well with me.

That meant admitting... No. It hurt too much to touch memories of families I almost had and then lost. “I don’t know.”

“What if I could help you figure it out?”

A woman’s perspective could be helpful. “How?”

Aubrey draped her arms around my neck and pressed her body to mine.

What the hell?

She shifted her weight and her frame rubbed against mine. “Does this help?” she asked, her mouth close enough to mine I felt the question. She kissed me.

I was too stunned to do anything in return. This was so fucking awkward.

Aubrey let go and put several inches between us, her face a stone mask. “I guess that’s a no.”

“I don’t feel that way about you.” And I didn’t think she felt that way about me. Seriously—what the hell?

“Of course you don’t. I was just kidding.” Her laugh was forced. “A joke between friends, right?” Her voice strained.

Shit. How did I never see this? “I’m sorry, Bree.” I should’ve known... But it wouldn’t have changed how I felt.

“Totally good.” Her reply was high and tight. “But I need to go. You don’t need my help anyway—everything’s under control.” As she talked, she backed away. “See you all later,” she called, before she ran up the stairs.

Shitshitshitshitshit.

“What did you do to her?” Adam asked.

“One too many sex doll jokes?” Evie offered.

“One too few clues,” Sebastian said.

That was about right. I needed to make things right with Aubrey, but I doubted she wanted me pounding on her door right now telling her *I’m sorry I don’t like you that way, but I don’t want to lose your friendship*. This sucked.

When we called it a night, it was almost ten, and we’d finished more than half the basement. One more day and we’d be set.

Adam and I headed up to our apartment, and settled in front of the TV with pizza. He picked the movie, promising I would love it.

I usually did.

“So you and Brooke... You’re just friends?” His tone was casual.

I had instant flashbacks to the conversation with Aubrey. “Yes. Why do people keep asking me that? Are you going to declare your undying love for me?”

“So that’s what happened with Aubrey. Does she know the two of you have zero chemistry?”

“Apparently not.” Why was I bothered that he didn’t answer a question I asked in total jest?

“You have to make things right with her,” Adam said.

No shit, Sherlock. “Why are you asking about Brooke?”

“Because I want more with her.”

More. The word hit me hard before I finished processing what it meant, and tension cranked through me. I twisted my neck, but it didn’t pop. “What if I say *no*?”

“You misunderstand.” An edge sneaked into Adam’s voice. “I’m not asking your permission. I’m telling you what’s about to happen.”

“But—”

“But what?” He was no longer friendly and casual. “You saw her first? You wanted her first? You’ve had so much time to figure out if you’re going to make a move for Brooke, and then you finally did something. You could’ve had her before I even knew I was interested and she probably would’ve said *yes*. I mean, you got her to fuck you with no strings attached, so that’s a good sign she’s interested. But you keep fucking denying it.”

I stared at Adam as he talked. Where the fuck did this come from, and why did his words dig deep?

“She’s not a toy,” Adam said. “You don’t get to play with her when you want and put her on the shelf out of reach of anyone else when you’re done. She’s a fucking human being. One I’d like to get to know a *lot* better. That’s all there is to it.”

Any response I had stalled in the tight space in my lungs where an invisible fist had squeezed out all the air. What was I supposed to say to that, and why was I so furious at what sounded like reasonable logic?

brooke

THE TWINS STAYED in their rooms most of Sunday, and when they did emerge they managed to avoid each other and me.

Because I was going stir crazy and it was clear neither of them were going to cook, in the late afternoon I grabbed the cane Deacon had given me and used it to hobble around the kitchen. I suspected he and Adam would have a fit if they knew, but they weren't here.

The thought ached in my chest and my brain shouted back that I shouldn't care.

But I did. I missed their company. I missed what had been happening with Adam.

I shouldn't be missing the same from Deacon, but I did. Not that anything had been happening there.

I needed to not think about him. Instead, I made the twins' favorite—boxed mac and cheese mixed with a can of tortilla soup and crumbled up corn chips on top. It may not be gourmet, but it was easy and hopefully it would lure them out of their rooms.

Paige came down for dinner, but Bryan refused to.

She filled up her plate without a word and shoveled food into her mouth.

“You’re both worrying me. You know that, don’t you? Don’t make me play the Mom Guilt Trip card.” I ate more slowly.

She huffed and let her fork clatter to the table. “Please don’t. I already have enough guilt for a lifetime.”

That was a heavy burden to carry at seventeen. “Maybe telling me what happened will help with that?”

“I doubt it.” She sighed heavily. “Bryan is upset with me because...” She huffed, and shoved more food into her mouth.

“Because why?” I kept my tone gentle. It was hard to imagine Paige doing anything to make her brother this mad.

“Because I guess he likes Jamie and he was going to tell her at the dance but apparently she likes me instead.”

Oh. I was going to assume *like* meant more in both cases. Should I have been prepared for my kids’ first huge fight to be over a shared love interest? “Okay.” I voice my tone free of judgment.

“She kissed me, Mom. She fucking kissed me, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about it.” Paige sounded distraught.

“Do you like her?”

“She’s my best friend, of course I do. But I like guys.”

My experience with this was limited to when Colin came out, and that was decades ago, and he’d seemed so certain when he made the announcement. Did he deal with this kind of doubt before then? Not that it mattered now. I needed to reassure Paige and I didn’t know how. “Can you tell her that?”

“But I liked the kiss.”

Whatever I said next, I was going to fail. I just knew it. “Maybe you like girls too. Your uncle Colin—”

“This isn’t about him. You don’t understand.” She pushed back from the table so hard her chair screeched against the tile, and she stomped from the room. “And don’t you dare ask him to talk to me.” Her screech from upstairs was laced with tears.

Damn it.

MONDAY MORNING BRYAN left for school early with a friend, and Paige slunk out of the house soon after, refusing to talk to or even look at me.

And I was in for a day of staying off my feet. Carly had sent me more books, but reading them reminded me of a kind of passion I’d had so briefly and then lost. Both in the past and now, even though it was two different kinds of passion.

I missed Adam’s company. I didn’t know how to help my kids. I missed hanging out with Deacon.

Maybe TV would help distract me. It was rare for me to just sit and watch, especially during the day, but losing myself in someone else’s drama might remind me that mine wasn’t so bad.

Every commercial seemed intent on reminding me that today was Valentine’s Day. That I should be celebrating love. That if I didn’t get and give fancy presents, I wasn’t loved. I’d been sans-Valentine for years. Why did the reminder hurt so much today?

Because I was having sex with a man who didn’t want anything else. I wasn’t supposed to be falling for him, but I

might be. And at the same time I was absolutely enthralled with his best friend. For the first time in years I thought I might have more with someone...

I should've known better, but my heart ached regardless. The TV played in the background. Who were Harmony and Spencer? Where were Luke and Laura? How freaking old was I?

The doorbell rang and I grabbed my phone to see the cam. The sight of Adam standing on my front porch made my heart leap into my throat then plummet into my shoes. It was tempting to tell him to come in, but I didn't trust myself to not do something stupid once he was in here.

That didn't mean I could stand to send him away or stop watching him.

"I'm pretty sure you're in there," Adam said. "And if you don't want to see me, I get it. But I'd really like to see you."

Me too. The reply lodged in my throat.

He held up two plastic bags. "I bought lunch and Valentine's Day gifts."

"You don't have to bring me presents in order to visit." I winced as the words slipped past my lips.

He smirked at the camera. "I know. I'm awesome all by myself."

I smiled in spite of myself. Letting him in would be so easy, and those words meant so much more than it seemed like on the surface. "What about Deacon?"

"What about him? You were right—this is about you and me."

I hovered my finger over the button that would unlock the door.

“Okay, I was prepared for this,” Adam said. On my phone screen he set down the bags he was carrying, and pulled his phone from his pocket. A moment later, the tinny strains of *Careless Whisper* flitted through my door and phone speaker, half a second out of sync with each other.

“What are you doing?” I laughed.

“Boom boxing WHAM! outside your house, a la Deadpool.”

How was I supposed to ignore a grand gesture like this? “I guess you can come in.” The offer may have sounded casual but my heart was fluttering in my chest.

Adam strode through the front door, set everything on the table, and knelt on the floor next to where I sat on the couch. He cradled my face in his hands, searching my face. The way he pressed his lips to mine was tender enough it made my heart ache all over again, but an intensity flowed between us that stole my breath and made me want to linger here forever.

He pressed his lips to my forehead, then rested his forehead in the same spot against mine, never letting go of my face. “I don’t know what this is, but I know I enjoy your company so much, and I want more of you. Let’s see where this goes. Be my Valentine?”

Saying *yes* seemed like a big mistake.

Saying *no* wasn’t an option, though. “Yes. I’d love to.”

“Perfect.” Adam stood. “Lunch first or dessert?”

“Dessert.” That was my default answer when he was around.

He reached into one of the bags, and pulled out an egg carton. My curiosity turned to delight when he plucked out a large chocolate covered strawberry. “Open up.” He pressed the sweet to my lips.

I tried to delicately bite into it, and the moment the chocolate hit my lips, I knew I’d failed. Bits of candy crumbled and juice dribbled down my chin. I squealed in surprise and failed to keep from making a mess.

Adam leaned in and licked my chin clean. I wasn’t sure if I should giggle or moan.

We managed to make it through one strawberry, but I was pretty sure we lost a quarter of the chocolate in the couch cushions. That was going to be a pain to clean up.

Not that I cared while Adam was running his mouth over mine and letting me suck his fingers clean.

We decided to save the rest of the dessert for later, though.

He settled next to me on the couch, and pulled me into his lap. How was this so easy?

“My first Valentine—” I snapped my jaw shut in horror as the words rushed past my lips. Was I really about to ruin this amazing moment by bringing up that part of my past? “Never mind.”

“What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “You don’t want to hear me talk about my deceased husband.”

“Is it a good memory?”

I expected him to say *you’re right* or change the subject or anything besides prodding for more. But the way Adam kept

his hands wrapped loosely around my waist, and his casual tone, said he was genuinely interested.

“They’re bittersweet,” I said. “But there’s an emphasis on the *sweet*.”

Adam squeezed my hip. “I know you didn’t pop into existence two weeks ago just for me. I won’t be upset that you loved someone else as long as you don’t expect me to be him.”

I’d be more upset if Adam started acting like anyone other than himself. “I don’t.”

“Then tell me. Your first Valentine.”

I nudged the edge of the memory, not sure I wanted to tug it loose. When the pain I expected didn’t pulse in my heart, I dared unwrap the images. “He brought me daisies from the neighbor’s yard, and drew me a comic strip of us going on a date.”

“Was he an artist?”

Both of us had been discouraged from touching our more creative sides. That wasn’t how people earned a living as adults. “Only casually. But he had a natural talent for it.”

“He sounds like a good guy. Not that you’d love anyone who wasn’t.” Adam’s tone was kind and sincere.

This was a bit surreal, but at the same time it was incredible. Sitting on the lap of a younger, gorgeous man, and talking about my husband as if it were the most natural subject.

“What about you? Do you have a good Valentine’s Day story?” Was I sure I wanted to ask that? I may not be able to tug up the pleasantness as easily as Adam did, especially if he had some tale about an ex he’d had amazing, kinky, all-night

sex with. The kind of evening I didn't even know enough about to imagine.

Though, my mind was trying.

"Today pretty much tops my list." Adam's words were sweet, but I wasn't sure I bought it.

"We made a mess eating fruit and now we're stuck on my couch because I have a twisted ankle."

He nuzzled my hair. "It's not the what, it's the who. Though, the what is pretty good too."

"And that's it? No other Valentine's Day compares?" Why was I pushing this?

"You don't want to hear about the other one."

Uncertainty clenched in my gut. Maybe he was right. "You just listened to me, of course I do. I already know you've been with other people," I said.

"But this story is about Deacon."

Oh. The man I shouldn't be missing. The one who didn't matter beyond being a casual friend, because I was cuddling with his best friend and enjoying the hell out of it.

Adam traced his thumb lightly along my skin, above the waistband of my sweats. "You can take the question back, if you'd like."

"I absolutely cannot. I'd like to know." Partly out of curiosity, and because it was polite to listen, and at least as much because I was more of a masochist than I realized. I needed to know more about how the two of them fit together.

Adam let out a laugh-sigh. "So, I'd lost my father about six months earlier, and my girlfriend walked away from me

shortly after that because...” His whole body seemed to deflate beneath me when he sighed. “I didn’t deal well with his passing.”

“I’m sorry.” I hated to hear his pain, and there had to be more than he was showing. “But we all deal with loss in our own ways. Who was she to judge?”

He shrugged. “We find out who people are when things are at their worst. But that’s just backstory so you understand—Deacon was there for me. And that Valentine’s Day he shut the shop early, cleared a huge space in the back room, and we spent the rest of the day watching ninja movies and monster movies that were so bad they were good. He told me the point was no calendar or person got to tell us when or what to feel.”

“Which is why I would’ve been on your porch this morning, doing exactly what I did, regardless of if today was Valentine’s Day or some random Wednesday in August,” Adam said.

And that was about the sweetest story ever, tied up with the sweetest sentiment. “I’m glad you did. I’m glad you’re here.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead. “Me too.”

We talked about so many little things. The kinds of conversation most people never wanted to overhear because it would be dry to anyone it didn’t matter to, and we fed each other cheese and fruit for lunch. Adam’s visit was simple but perfect.

He cleaned up after lunch, and pulled me back into his lap when he returned to the couch. I was going to have a hard time sitting anywhere else after this.

“You know what I’ve never done on Valentine’s Day?” Adam said.

“Bungee jumping? Because I’m going to need to wait a little bit before we try that.” I wiggled my injured leg.

He laughed, cupped my face, and gave me one of those long kisses that was as sweet as the strawberries had been, but had an underlying spice that made me think he might consume me in flame if he pushed a little harder.

He broke away and searched my face. “I’ve never made out with someone on Valentine’s Day. You know, a really good, intense session of kissing and groping.”

“It seems like a shame to not have experienced that at least once in your life.” My imagination was already racing along the possibilities and my body whimpered for the reality of it.

“Right?” Adam slipped one hand to the back of my neck and tightened his grip, holding me captive. The way he crushed his mouth to mine was both playful and possessive, and I gasped in surprise.

An unwelcome voice came out of nowhere, whispering in the back of my mind and asking *what about Deacon?*

What about him? Adam was here, and I was enjoying every minute of his company, from the talking to the kisses and everything in between.

I pressed in harder, searing thoughts of only Adam into my mind, and memorizing the way his mouth seared my skin and consumed my soul and left me desperate for more.

adam

EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS WAS INCREDIBLE—BROOKE’S weight in my lap, the little sounds of delight she made, and the heat that flowed between us.

I felt like a teenager again, making out with my crush, and exploring each other like it was our first time. Her shirt was pushed up around her neck and her bra was undone, so I could memorize the topography of her breasts, and figure out which licks, sucks, and nibbles produced the best results.

She had my shirt off completely, and her nails on my skin were delicious.

The sound of tires on pavement and the growl of an engine reached us from outside and Brooke froze.

She was instantly as pale as her white cotton panties. “That’s Paige’s car.”

And suddenly this was *way* too much like when I was a teenager. We managed to pull our clothes back on, straighten them, and slide Brooke back onto the couch just as the front door opened.

“Look, hon. Adam’s back,” Brooke said when Paige walked in.

Paige rolled her eyes. “Big fucking deal.”

“Did I miss something?” I asked.

“Her best friend ki—”

“Oh my fuck.” Paige talked over Brooke. “Are you going to tell everyone?” She turned from the room and a moment later a door slammed.

Brooke’s sigh was nothing like the ones she was making just a few minutes ago. “There was a lot of that this weekend.”

“Do you want me to talk to her?” Why did I just offer that? I didn’t know anything about consoling teenagers, especially girls.

“You’re sweet to offer, but I don’t think she’d appreciate that. I should probably figure out how to get at least one of them talking to me again.”

I hated to end the day on this note, but this seemed like a good reason to do so. “I had a lot of fun today.”

“Me too.” Brooke’s smile was back. “Thank you.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow.” And almost every day that she’d let me come back. I was addicted to this. I gave her one more long kiss, and stood. “Call me if you need anything?”

“I will.”

As I was walking to my car, a horrible sound screeched out from the shed Brooke used as a workshop. It sounded like someone assaulting a robot. I followed the noise to find Paige beating on the gas tank of her motorcycle with a wrench.

“*Whoa,*” I shouted over the noise. “What did the bike ever do to you?”

She scowled at me. “It won’t start.”

“I wouldn’t either if you hit me repeatedly in the gut with a wrench.”

She faced me completely, wrench hanging loosely at her side. “Then again, you also wouldn’t start if I yanked out vital components and didn’t replace them.”

Did she just threaten me? “I’ll leave you alone.” I turned away.

“Are you fucking my mom?” Paige’s question hit my back as hard as I imagined that wrench might.

I really didn’t want to get into this with her. “That’s between her and me.” I faced her again.

“So, yes. Because otherwise you’d say *no*.”

I made a point of clamping my mouth shut. Something told me there wouldn’t be any winners in this conversation.

“Are you fucking Deacon?” Paige asked.

I was being interrogated by a seventeen year old. “Not currently.” Though the question sent a spike of regret through me. “I’m talking to you.” And wondering what the best way was to walk away without being rude.

Paige turned back to her bike, but her arms still hung at her sides. Were we done?

I opened my mouth to wish her a better day, so I could leave.

“What do you do when people don’t act the way you expect them to?” She asked.

That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it? “I wish I knew.”

Paige sank onto a nearby metal stool. “Did Mom tell you what happened at the dance?”

“No. You asked her not to.” I was not equipped to handle teenage angst. I barely knew how to handle my own.

“So you do know how to give a straight answer.”

“Nothing I do is completely straight. It’s always at least a little bi.” If I was making bad jokes, I was nervous.

The corners of Paige’s mouth tugged up in an almost-smile.

“You don’t have to laugh. No one actually likes that joke,” I said.

This time she did smile. “You do, or you wouldn’t use it more than once.”

“I pun when I don’t know what to say. Or make movie references.” I pulled up a second stool and sat across from her.

She nodded at her motorcycle. “I leave. The bike takes me away from awkward conversation, except when it doesn’t work.”

I’d rarely related to something more. “Do you want to talk about it? I can make motorcycle noises if it helps.”

Paige laughed. “You’re just some random dude. Why would I talk to you?”

“I don’t have a stake in the outcome.”

“You’re fucking my mom.”

If she thought she could beat me at the talking in circles game, she was about to meet a master. “I thought I was just some random dude. Besides, I didn’t say that, you did.”

“You confirmed by denial. Why do you care what’s pissing me off?” Paige said.

“I don’t like to see people upset. And I promise if you choose to unload on me, I’m not going to judge or share your secrets. Not even with Brooke.”

“Unless it’s illegal or dangerous?”

I smirked. “Exactly.”

Paige sighed. “Bryan likes this girl Jamie. And she’s my best friend.”

“Okay.” Did she not want her brother dating her friends? That didn’t line up with what Brooke started to say inside.

Paige twisted her mouth and her fingers. Silence stretched between us, and I tempered my patience.

“But apparently Jamie likes me and she kissed me and now Bryan hates me and I can’t look Jamie in the eye and everyone else at school is stupid and I just want out of this dumb town.” When Paige finally spoke the words tumbled out in a rush.

“I hated high school too.”

Paige pursed her lips. “Hardly my point.”

“I know.” I was trying to fumble my way through a conversation and not piss her off again. I really did feel where she was coming from, but I doubted she’d believe me if I just said so.

“You don’t even get it.” Paige’s huff was full of frustration.

Then again, being direct was easier than trying to guess how to be sneaky. “I do. I’ve been there.”

“You really hated high school? You’re so smart.”

“So are you. Do you not like Jamie?”

“She’s my best friend,” Paige said. “I like her enough to say that, and I swear to God if you ask me if I *like* like her...”

I wouldn’t now. “Are you attracted to her?”

“I like boys. I had a boyfriend. I *really* liked kissing him.”

I liked kissing boys too. And girls. This *really* wasn’t a conversation I should be having with her. She needed someone closer to her. Not *some random dude*. “Okay.”

“But I really liked kissing Jamie,” Paige said.

“You’re allowed to like both.”

Paige growled. “I know that. But I don’t like both.”

I wanted to argue she just said exactly the opposite.

“Besides, Bryan likes her.” Paige’s voice grew quiet and all of the fight seemed to drain from her, leaving her looking deflated.

“This isn’t about him.” My conversations with Brooke and Deacon echoed in my mind. I was giving her advice I’d practiced, but I was also doubting my decision to push Deacon away the way I had. “So go find her and kiss her back and see what happens.”

“But what about—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said.

Paige scowled. “You don’t know what I was going to say.”

No, but I had a pretty good idea it was a protest having to do with her brother’s feelings. “It doesn’t matter,” I repeated. “If you like the kiss, you can keep doing it. If you don’t, you owe it to her to let her know. If Bryan doesn’t like it, he needs to learn to deal because life isn’t always what we want it to be. And if the uptight fucks at your school don’t like it, fuck ‘em.

You're graduating in four months, make a memory or two that *you* want before then."

"Harsh."

Not really. "Honest."

"A lot of people don't like that kind of honesty," Paige said.

"Nope. Promise me you won't beat up the motorcycle anymore?"

Paige's smile was back, and some of her tension was gone. "I promise. Thank you."

Now if only it were so easy to figure out my own confusion and take my own advice. I should forget about Deacon as anything more than a friend, and focus on Brooke.

But my mind rebelled at the thought.

deacon

WITH MOST OF the work done in the basement that required a crew, the next week was spent making sure the space was usable as an expansion to the showroom. The only big job left was reinforcing the stairs. Tuesday night, Evie helped Adam and I get those in place.

The rest of the week, he and I spent evenings fixing the place up. It was fun. A lot more fun than work should be, but that was one reason I enjoyed my shop—it wasn't a slog. But during the day when Adam went to visit Brooke, there was a smoldering ember inside me that burned for me to yank him back. To growl *mine*.

Except I didn't know if it was Adam or Brooke it wanted to yank away, and I wanted this feeling gone. It wouldn't serve anyone.

When he came back Friday night, he told me Brooke was cleared to walk around again, as long as she took it easy, and that she wanted to come see the work we'd done. That possessive spark roared to a flame with the reminder that a month ago, Brooke would have told me that directly and never given a second thought to if Adam knew. I smothered the feeling.

Saturday, mid-afternoon after most of the DIY-ers had finished their shopping, Adam headed to Evie's. His videos of Sebastian's had done so well that he was working his way through other shops on the street.

He'd wanted to do Aubrey's place next, and tie it into mine, but she wasn't answering texts or calls, and she managed to make herself busy anytime one of us stopped by.

I was trying to give her space to cool down, but I didn't want to be waiting. I wanted to make things right with her. I wanted Brooke back. I didn't want Adam going to visit...

Was I asking too much?

Absolutely. I needed to get my shit together.

Adam called a little before eleven.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Hey. Dylan is there, right?"

"Yes."

"This is running long," Adam said. "Will you go pick up Brooke?"

She can drive herself, can't she? I loathed the thought and that I'd had it the moment it entered my mind. Besides, I was more desperate to see her again than I wanted to admit. Which, of course I was. I missed a friend. "Yeah. No problem."

For some reason, *Brooke's just a friend, the same way Adam is* repeated in my head the entire drive to her house.

When I arrived, there was a car in her driveway I didn't recognize. A battered old sedan that looked like it had as much rust as mileage.

Brooke was talking to a man who was trying to shove a welded hunk of something into his back seat. Her smile was bright and he had her full attention.

He straightened up enough for me to get a good look. The guy was a solid wall of muscle, with cropped short hair. The hints of silver meant he was probably close to Brooke's age, and he could probably break her with those fucking upper arms.

A strange noise drew my attention and I realized I was growling. I swallowed the response, and climbed from my truck. Approaching with confidence, I continued to size him up until I reached him and Brooke.

"Deacon, *hey*." Her voice was bright and her smile had grown. "This is Quentin."

He extended his hand. "Pleasure. Where did you serve?"

I squeezed tightly to let him know I wouldn't be intimidated, and tried to make sense of his question. "Denny's, for about two weeks in high school? Waiting tables wasn't for me."

"Ah. I assumed..." He scrubbed a hand over his head.

Oh. Right. I forgot some days I had the military-style haircut. "No. I was never military." Was I picking on some old vet? "Much respect, though." I added quickly, making sure he knew I was sincere.

Brooke moved to stand next to me, facing Quentin. "Deacon did a charity stream with a friend for Christmas, and had to shave his head as part of it. A Konsoles for Kids thing."

I wanted to smirk in self-satisfaction. *See, I can help too.* But a charity stream was hardly equivalent to military duty,

and why did I care what this Quentin guy thought or what Brooke thought of me compared to him?

“Cool.” Quentin nodded.

“Thanks.” My reply came out tight and didn’t make any sense as a response to what he’d said. Apparently I was using up my good will.

Quentin gave the slightest shake of his head. “Anyway, I need to go. Great to meet you Deacon, and I’ll see you around, Brooke.”

“Remember, you’re welcome any time.” Brooke pulled Quentin into a tight hug that seared my insides with something muddy and heated. Especially when Quentin met my gaze over her shoulder, and raised an eyebrow.

My thoughts were still seething when he left, so I didn’t realize Brooke was talking to me until she waved her hand in front of my face.

“Earth to Deacon,” she called.

I yanked myself back together. “Right. What? Did you want to go, or do you need to... something?”

“I’m ready.” Her tone sounded off.

Then again, mine probably did too. We climbed into my truck and the engine sputtered a few times before roaring to life. I pointed us toward my shop.

“Does Adam know about Quentin?” The question slipped past my lips without permission. I was barely okay with Adam and Brooke as a couple. Add another guy to the mix, one who could probably coax Brooke into all sorts of pretzely shapes—

Brooke gave a short, throat-clearing cough. “Does Adam know that I have friends? Presumably.” Her voice was tight.

“I just mean...”

“What?” She asked. “What do you mean? Does Adam know I have friends with penises? He asked you to make sure I had a ride, so it seems that way. Adam doesn’t dictate who I spend time with, and does it matter what my friends have hanging between their legs?”

Brooke had been gone for two weeks. I’d been pretending that entire time that I didn’t need to go visit her, and now that she was sitting in my truck I was picking a fight. I forced myself to chill the fuck out. “It doesn’t.”

“Good.” She tucked her hands into her lap.

“Exactly.” I drove.

Brooke sighed.

And now there was that heavy, unnatural silence that I hated.

“How are things looking in your basement?” Brooke’s tone was neutral.

I didn’t want to fake a conversation for the sake of filling empty air. “Adam’s probably already told you.”

“I’m asking you. I want to hear if *you’re* happy with the way things look and what *your* thoughts on the matter are.”

I gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles ached, hoping I could get a grip on myself as well. “Things are going well.” There, was that so hard? “I’m really happy with the way it all came together. The lighting looks great. Thank you for the wiring.”

“Of course. Any time. Did you get any pushback from Travis?”

How much did she know? It didn't matter, because she asked for my thoughts. "He's doing his damndest to make everyone's lives miserable right now. I don't know if he's suffering from tiny dick syndrome or what."

"Really. You don't know that?" Brooke's tone was flat, but a hint of amusement undercut the words.

I shot her a puzzled look. "What? Why?"

"I'd just assume that at the very least he thinks he is. Or he's upset he didn't get an invite to the cool kids' party."

My laugh was half-entertained, half-disbelief. "I can promise you we're not the cool kids."

"From the outside, the people who own the shops on Main are very much the cool kids. Tattooed. Confident. High tech meets classy shops. You know you're all in enviable positions, right? You, Aubrey, Sebastian, Evie... All of you."

I'd never thought of it that way before. We were all struggling to stay open, especially with Travis and the council forcing new regulations, and our customers tended to be there as much for the novelty as the actual merchandise.

But I did love what I did, and most of them felt the same.

Not that it mattered. Regardless of how we saw ourselves, Travis's decrees wouldn't change. And really, as long as Brooke was smiling and joking with me again, I could think about everything else later.

When we got back to the antique shop, Adam had returned. He was behind the counter talking to Dylan when we walked in.

"You're back." The shift in Adan's expression when he saw Brooke, from casual to bright as sunshine, was

unmistakable. He hopped from the stool he was sitting on, crossed the distance between us, and reached for her.

Brooke took a step away, and the frown that whispered across her face was mirrored in Adam's expression.

Was that because of me? There was no way they'd acted like this when Adam went to visit her. "You don't have to act any differently around me than you would if you were alone," I said. "If you're dating, you're dating."

Adam loosely grasped her fingertips.

Pursing her lips, Brooke looked past me, to Dylan. She moved further into the shop. "I don't know how public we're making things yet." Her voice was so soft I had to strain to make out the words.

I still wasn't sure I'd heard them right.

But based on the scowl etched on Adam's face, Brooke said exactly what I thought she did.

How dare she?

And why was as much of me cheering as upset? The surge of ambivalence was enough for me to choke on.

brooke

I WANTED to take my reactions to Adam back, but I couldn't, no matter how much hurt was in his gaze. What was I doing? Giving up someone amazing because...

Because of nothing. I closed the distance between us and brushed my lips over Adam's, relishing the spark that hadn't diminished at all in the last week.

He slipped his hand to the back of my neck, holding me in place, and deepened the kiss until the only thing, the only person who existed was him.

"You had me worried for a minute." His teasing was undercut with a more serious tone when he broke the kiss and moved his hands to mine.

"I'm gonna take a break," Dylan said nervously.

And that was at the root of my hesitation. Most of it. I forced a smile. "It's not that I'm not enjoying this, but people talk, and the twins and..."

And Deacon was watching us and I didn't dare look at his reaction, after the way he reacted to Quentin.

"Deacon isn't people," Adam teased.

Deacon cleared his throat loudly. "Thanks."

“Not what I mean.” Adam turned to him. “I mean you’re not a fucking town gossip who’s going to spread this everywhere, and Dylan’s not either. You’re not a generic being, you’re Deacon.”

I should better explain my reaction, but I wasn’t sure I understood it myself. With Deacon next to me and Adam reaching for me, my brain stopped working when everything I wanted collided with everything I wasn’t supposed to have.

It wasn’t just about people talking, though I did worry about how gossip would come back on the twins, but it was about Deacon, which made me a freaking hypocrite. I adored what I had with Adam and wanted more.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve dated—as we’ve discussed—and I’m feeling my way around how it works.” That sounded reasonable, didn’t it? It was the truth, so it had better.

And the way Adam wove his fingers with mine and squeezed my hand was both reassuring and warmed me with promises of more later. “It’s perfectly reasonable,” he said.

Deacon nodded. “I get it. Not that I need to, but I do.”

Good. *Great* even. And maybe next time I was alone with Adam, we’d make it all the way to third base. A whisper in the back of my mind reminded me that probably meant giving up *lessons* with Deacon. That I was most likely already at that point. And the thought of that...

When did I turn into a sex fiend? Was this what a fifteen-plus year dry spell did to a woman?

Both Adam and Deacon were watching me. Crap, one of them had asked me something. “I’m sorry, what?” Did I need

more sex or less to make sure I could pay better attention next time?

“Do you want the basement grand tour?” Deacon asked.

Are you hitting on me? The teasing question didn't make any sense, and even if it did, I had no idea how it would land. A few weeks ago, that kind of joke would've been normal, but now... “I'd like that, yes.” I hid a wince at the formal language.

Neither of them looked fazed and I probably needed to stop thinking so much.

We headed toward the basement, and I could tell from that first step that things were different. For instance, I wasn't afraid I was going to fall through a stair on the way down. When we reached the bottom, Deacon flicked one of the switches I'd installed, and light flooded the entire room.

They led me through the new maze. There were a few walls in place, and the supports had been reinforced and made pretty, but mostly they'd left the entire place open, similar to upstairs. There was a lot more order to the furniture now, though. It was obvious that certain styles were grouped together and there was a flow to the room.

“I love it,” I found myself saying over and over again. And when we reached the end of the tour, I asked, “When are you opening it to the public?”

“Unofficially on Monday, and we're making a bigger deal about it next weekend,” Deacon said. “Adam's going to do a big series of videos.”

It was perfect. I had so many questions. “Did you ever figure out how it all got down here in the first place? Do you

know why no one told you there was a basement? Are you keeping any pieces for yourself?”

“No, no, and no.” Deacon gave a faint smile.

This entire exchange felt stilted. I wanted him to make a joke. To flirt with me in a way I didn’t know how to deal with. For Adam to pull an obscure movie reference out that I loved understanding. What were the odds the three of us could go back to the way things were without me giving up the new things as well? “I think I need another lesson.”

White-hot embarrassment spread through me when I realized what I’d just said. Deacon and Adam looked shocked. I needed to back the heck up. “Not like that.” Exactly like that. How horrible was I being? “I meant to go back to normal. Before...” I didn’t want to dig this hole I was in deeper. “That was the original point, right? Teach me how to date without...” I sighed. “Without making an idiot of myself and alienating you.” I looked at Deacon.

Adam brushed his lips over my cheek. “You’re not being an idiot. This is weird for everyone.”

“Speak for yourselves.” Deacon deflated. “Yeah, okay. It’s gotten weird, hasn’t it? I have a solution, though.”

Not that long ago, I would’ve expected a statement like that to lead to innuendo, that I wouldn’t have known how to handle. I would’ve blushed, he would’ve winked, and the conversation would’ve moved on. “What are you thinking?”

“That.” Deacon pointed to a couch. “That.” He pointed to a wood and silk tri-fold screen.

Adam grinned. “Dim the lights, grab the projector.”

The pieces clicked. “Movie night.” Not something I’d ever done with them before. Nothing like back to the way things

had been, but it felt right. I needed *right*. “I’m in. What are we watching?”

“*Samurai Cop*,” Adam said without hesitation.

Deacon high-fived him. “*Yes*.”

“There’s no way that’s a real thing.” No. Way. They’d thrown words together trying to be funny.

Adam’s grin grew. “Oh, Brooke. Sweet, sweet, Brooke. Your world is about to be rocked.”

“Or, it may feel more like rock-bottom, depending on how you feel about the movie.” Deacon’s tone was playful.

I was beyond intrigued. “Let’s see this marvelous wonder you call *Ninja Cop*.”

“*Samurai Cop*,” Adam corrected me. “Very important detail. I’ll grab my gear.” He turned toward the stairs.

“I’ll close the shop and call for food,” Deacon said.

Adam gave me a quick kiss on the lips. “Don’t go anywhere.”

I perched on the edge of the couch while I waited. They weren’t gone long. Within fifteen minutes, Deacon had an assortment of wings, Adam had his laptop hooked up to a small HD projector, and they had arranged the furniture so we could watch.

The guys sat on either side of me, and Adam started the movie.

“There’ll be lines through the movie.” I nodded at the tri-fold divider with opening credits reflected off it.

“It doesn’t even matter. I promise you.” Adam handed me a plate piled with food.

That seemed unlikely, but they seemed to know what they were doing.

For the next hour and half, I watched in amazement and horror, mixed with the frequent laugh of disbelief, at the mess that played out in front of us.

When it was over, I stared at the silk screen where images had been seconds earlier, and blinked rapidly in disbelief. “What did we just watch?”

“Epic, right?” Adam asked.

Deacon snorted. “So bad it’s good.”

“Softcore porn?” I was still processing. “Meets eighties sitcom? With bad editing?”

“More or less.” Adam didn’t sound bothered at all. “You laughed.”

“Because it was *bad*.”

“That’s the point,” Deacon said. “Hilariously bad.”

It was starting to make sense. A little. *Samurai Cop* kept playing in my mind, as much as I wanted to forget it. “And then he brought out a cake, and sang *Happy Birthday*, wearing nothing but a thong.”

“You mean that didn’t turn you on, baby?” Deacon’s tone was instantly over-the-top seductive in a not-quite Austin Powers kind of way.

I made a fake gagging noise. “I know you’re not even a little serious right now.”

Adam tugged me into his lap, as if it were the most natural thing. Then again, it had become that. He trailed his nose

lightly up my neck. “You don’t want some sexy hunk of beef in practically nothing bringing you cake in bed?”

“I mean...” How was I supposed to answer that? It felt like a trick question.

“I do.” Adam nipped my earlobe.

He was saying one thing, but was it what he meant to say?

“Wait. Do you want to be the sexy hunk, or be served by the sexy hunk?” Deacon voiced the question in my head.

Adam puffed out his cheeks and exhaled slowly, his brow furrowed. “That’s a tough call. On the one hand, you look really good in practically nothing, and on the other, I’m not sure I trust you to bake a cake.”

“Fuck you.” Deacon laughed. “I’d bake an amazing cake.”

What did I just hear? My brain backed up. It was exactly what I’d been missing—the flirting banter without hesitation—and on the one hand I liked the potential behind it and on the other hand I wondered why I thought it was okay. “Did you just hit on someone else while I was sitting in your lap?”

“Yes?” Adam seemed unfazed. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d happily eat your cake—take that as you will—and even more happily watch you walk around in practically nothing.” He slid a hand lightly up my inner thigh. “But you won’t fill out a banana hammock the same way Deacon will.” He teased his fingers lightly over my crotch.

Oh, jeez. I gasped at his playful touch. “Banana hammock? Seriously?” I tried to force the laughter into my voice, but I was falling into fantasies of both of them undressed, enhanced by every caress Adam laid through my clothing.

“Whale tail?” Deacon asked.

“Butt floss?” Adam added.

I laughed. “This is the education I never knew I needed. Slang terms for *thong*.”

“You’re welcome.” Deacon gave me a seated bow.

Adam danced his fingertips down my spine. “Or did you have something else in mind when you asked for another lesson?”

Yes. This felt like a trap. Asking for what I wanted was a fast track to losing an incredible opportunity with Adam before we could even explore what we had. But he was the one who brought us back to this point in the conversation.

What was the right answer?

adam

MORE SEX SEEMED like the next logical step in this relationship.

Sex with both Brooke and Deacon.

Then again, my dick was rock hard from the way she pressed against me and I couldn't stop thinking about how incredible the last couple of times had been, so it was possible *logical* actually meant *the only thing I could think about with all the blood rushing to my cock*.

Possible.

But that didn't mean I was wrong.

Besides, it was obvious that the two of them were still attracted to each other, regardless of what they told themselves or me. There was no way in Hell I was letting someone as amazing as Brooke go, but I was starting to think I felt more than friendship for Deacon, and not just because the sex was good.

So, yeah, I was going to push for more from both of them. More time spent together, more movies, more fucking, more of Deacon dominating her and bowing to me, more Brooke squirming in pain and screaming in pleasure.

Just *more*.

But Brooke hadn't answered my question and Deacon was unusually quiet, so I was going to nudge a little harder.

"We should head upstairs," I said. When Deacon frowned and opened his mouth, I realized I needed to say more. "All three of us."

Brooke didn't move. "What's upstairs?"

"A lot more room to maneuver and furniture that we can get stains on without ruining Deacon's livelihood." I liked clever euphemisms and flirting, but at some point, things had to be said plainly.

"Why would we get stains— *Oh*." Brooke ducked her head, but it didn't hide her blush.

She was wonderful. The perfect combination of bold and strong meets sweet and innocent

I looked at Deacon. "You and I did promise to show Brooke what the candles were for besides light when the power went out."

He furrowed his brow and bit his bottom lip.

"It can't be that hard a decision." I was surprised by his hesitation.

"It's not. Or rather, *something's* hard, but..."

Brooke pushed away from me and stood. I wasn't sure if I should be excited or disappointed.

"Are we allowed to do this?" she asked.

Disappointed. Or confused. "Why wouldn't we be?"

She shrugged. "I thought you and I were..." She sighed. "A couple."

“I did too.” I needed to remember I couldn’t make assumptions about people seeing the world the way I did. “I’m pretty sure that means we are. But if I want to have sex with both you and Deacon, and you want to have sex with Deacon and me, and Deacon wants... You see where this is going... If all three of us agree, it seems like we’re allowed to do it.”

“Then why don’t more people do it?” Brooke asked. “It’s obviously really incredible.”

“Because more people don’t agree.” About a lot of things, but this wasn’t the time to get philosophical. I stood and grasped her hands. “But if you’re not interest—”

“I am. I very much am.”

Deacon let out a short laugh.

I shot him a look that I hoped conveyed *don’t you dare make her feel bad or dumb about this*.

He looked back with wide eyes that I hoped just as much meant *I wouldn’t ever*. “A little rope and a lot of wax sounds like a perfect next step to the evening, in my opinion.”

“Rope?” Brooke’s voice came out in a squeak and the pink of her flush spread along her neck and arms.

This was going to be so much fun.

I grasped one of her hands and Deacon took the other, and we led her upstairs. With each step, my cock rubbed against my zipper with agonizing friction. After a week of make-out sessions, I was ready to explode from anticipation.

Especially if Deacon was involved.

In my bedroom, I pulled out the trunk with my supplies, and set the wax up to start melting. Next I grabbed a worn, comfortable blanket from the same box. The comforter wasn’t

anything special—it came from a thrift store—but I used it exclusively for play, so laying it on the bed made me harder.

I tossed a bundle of silk rope on top of it, and turned to Brooke. “This is the same as before—if you want to stop, you tell me. You have to tell me or I won’t know.” It sounded obvious, but the rules were important to drive home.

She was flushed and her lips glistened from where she kept running her tongue over them. “Okay.”

I knelt at her feet and undid the laces on her boots. I helped her step out one shoe at a time, followed by her socks, and Deacon tugged her shirt over her head. Last, I pushed her jeans to the ground.

Brooke was wearing a matching pink bra and panty set, trimmed with lace and just a few shades darker than her skin. I could be dim, but I recognized exactly what the underwear meant—she’d been prepared to tell me *yes* tonight.

I’d have to make sure not to disappoint.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” Deacon muttered.

The fact that I was hard enough to drill a hole through the floor with my cock reinforced how much I agreed.

Brooke clasped her hands in front of her, managing demure in practically nothing.

Fuck, this woman...

“Lingerie stays on,” I said. “Protect the more sensitive bits.” Though I couldn’t help but glide a hand under the elastic of her waistband, along her bare skin, making her shiver.

“On your back. Middle of the bed,” I ordered.

Brooke complied.

Deacon tied her hands together and secured them above her head.

I glided my palms down her thighs, along her calves, and to her ankles, kissing along the same path I touched, before securing her feet wide apart to the bed frame. “Deacon’s right.”

“About a lot of things,” Brooke said. “What specifically?” There was a quiver in her voice.

I studied her, bound and at our mercy. “You are gorgeous and I’m already thinking of tying you up like this again and again, and all the things we can do to you.” I meant to say *I* could do to her, but I didn’t want to correct myself.

“Me too,” Deacon said. “Except yours probably hurt a little more.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How do you figure?”

“Only one of us is a sadist.”

I shrugged. “Your loss. Besides, you like watching.”

Deacon grinned. “Guilty.”

“You’re in luck, because it’s showtime.” I grabbed a bottle of baby oil, poured a generous amount in my hand, and handed the bottle to Deacon.

“Is that part of the play?” Brooke asked.

“Yes.” I worked my way up one of her legs while Deacon started on her stomach. “And it’s part of the clean-up.”

He and I took our time covering her generously with oil and making her moan and glisten in the process.

I grabbed one of the candles, and the wax that had pooled at the base. “I love painting a blank canvas, but I’ve never had

one that looks like you before,” I said to Brooke.

“Painting?”

“With all the pretty colors.” I dribbled a few light drops along her arms, where she should be less sensitive, to gauge her response.

She sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth when the hot wax hit her skin. *Fuck* I loved that sound and the way she instinctively jerked against the ropes. It was incredible, hearing her and watching her stretched out for me to do with as I pleased.

I moved to her ribs next, alternating between rhythmic drips of color, and drizzled lines. Then down to her stomach. Each time wax hit her skin, Brook squirmed and whimpered.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

Her *yes* was a jolt of want inside. “But not in a bad way,” she said.

She might as well have taken my entire length in her mouth.

The longer I worked, the more I fell into it. I didn’t want to talk, I wanted to paint. To pick out those spots on Brooke that were soft, tender, and extra sensitive. Along her pelvis. The tops of her breasts. Her inner thighs.

The sounds she made were incredible, and the design that lay in front of me was more stunning than anything that hung in The Louvre.

She was writhing and panting and tugging against the ropes.

Fuck I needed her.

I barely had enough sense to roll on a condom after I freed my cock. Note to self—next time ask beforehand if we could do this without protection. With a tug in the right place, the ropes on her legs fell away. I shoved her panties aside, and thrust my cock inside her.

She was so slick and tight, and felt *so* good. I wanted to hammer until I was spent, but instead I rested there, and moved my thumb to her clit. I teased and coaxed and stroked, watching her in fascination as her breathing grew more shallow. As the colors flexed and moved and broke along her skin. As she clenched her hands into tight fists and tugged against the ropes.

And when she came, her scream of pleasure was as delicious as her grunts of pain had been. She clenched around me, and I pushed her harder, drawing out her orgasm until she tried to pull away. I coaxed her into another orgasm, and when I felt her squeeze me for a second time, in a powerful clench, I pressed her knees to her chest and fucked her hard.

I let go of the last of my restraints and lost myself in her. In knowing Deacon watched us while he stroked himself. He hadn't come yet—he knew better.

Need tightened in my muscles and in my balls, coiling through me until I was wound tight and ready to snap. Orgasm tore from me, and I slammed inside Brooke with abandon, until I was spent.

I paused for a moment to catch my breath, then leaned in and pressed my lips to the hollow of her neck, behind her ear. “I think Deacon wants you too.”

Her laugh was faint and light. “Okay.” Her voice was soft.

I moved aside. Watching Deacon take my place and penetrate Brooke was incredible, especially knowing what he was feeling as she wrapped around him.

I reached above her head and untied her wrists, and she immediately moved her hands to clench the comforter in tight fists. Watching her take another man—no, Deacon specifically—knowing that he'd waited for this chance, was almost enough to make me hard again, despite my being spent.

Especially with the colors still splashed across her skin, some broken and some still intact.

And when Deacon came, hard and loud, pushing Brooke into climax again, it was an incredible sight.

He rolled over next to her, and we all lay there for a moment, the hum of the boiler keeping our heavy breathing company.

I forced myself to move. This next bit was as important as anything else—me coming down and making sure Brooke could do the same. Deacon and I were gentle about peeling the wax away, wiping Brooke clean, and rubbing aloe on any red marks that lingered.

As we pulled off her bra and panties, we couldn't help another round of play. Deacon sucked on her nipples and teased her breasts while I fingered her to orgasm again. She didn't say anything, but she made some delicious sounds. She was lost in the pleasure.

I needed to tug her back, but gently, so I lay behind her and pulled her into me. Deacon and I made soft, meaningless conversation, and eventually Brooke joined in.

I'd done things like this more than a few times in my life, both with and without the sex. But with Brooke, with Deacon,

it was different. I didn't want something with just one of them —I wanted them both. On an ongoing basis.

The thought gripped me hard and refused to let go.

Curling up with Brooke and Deacon was definitely one of my favorite things. “We should make a habit of this.” I was playing a teensy bit dirty, testing the waters while everyone was still glowing from sex. Or it was a strategic choice. Yeah, I liked that better, especially since I was already addicted to having both of them in my bed.

Brooke leaned more weight into me. “I wouldn't mind.” Her voice was soft. Almost dream-like.

She'd probably agree to a lot in this state of mind, so I needed to be careful and make sure we hashed out details when she was thinking more clearly. But her words warmed me regardless.

Until I looked at Deacon. His expression was neutral at best and honestly it was more like a scowl hiding behind a mask. “You two should enjoy that.” His tone was cool.

Brooke stiffened in my arms.

I didn't blame her for the reaction. “Pretty sure you're here with us.” I kept my tone light. “You're going to tell me you hated every minute that led up to that orgasm?” I poured the teasing into my voice, but I also used severe language on purpose.

“Nope. The orgasms were amazing,” Deacon said quickly. “Mine. Everyone's.” Despite the lift to his reply, there was still an edge.

I didn't want to argue. I wanted to enjoy the bliss that came from what we'd just done. It was time to let this slide and go back to cuddling.

“But at some point between tonight and tomorrow morning”—Deacon had other ideas apparently—“I go back to my bed and the two of you do whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Right now we’re lying here with you,” I said.

“But he’s got a point.” Brooke no longer sounded like she was wrapped in happy clouds.

Deacon smirked, but his eyes were cold. “See?”

I wasn’t sure I did. “See what?”

“It’s okay.” Brooke seemed to have absorbed Deacon’s mood. “I knew what I was doing with Deacon. Learning how to navigate the dating world.”

“Exactly.” Deacon cut the word off. “We set those rules up front, and the two of you are fantastic together so mission accomplished.”

“School’s out,” Brooke said.

I didn’t like any of this. Was I the asshole here? No. I wasn’t the one refusing to see what the three of us could have.

Deacon climbed from my bed. “Speaking of, I’ll be in my room. You two crazy kids enjoy your night.”

“Don’t—”

I was cut off by him softly closing my bedroom door.

Brooke pressed into me again. “Final lesson learned,” she muttered so quietly I didn’t know if I was meant to hear it.

I pressed my lips to her forehead and tried not to drown in frustration.

deacon

IN THE MORNING, Adam's bedroom door was open, and he and Brooke were nowhere to be found.

Fine. Perfect. I got quiet time.

Then again, I'd had plenty of that last night, and all the way up until about five this morning when I finally drifted to sleep from exhaustion.

And none of the tossing and turning in bed had helped me figure out why I was so upset that I'd made the right decision, walking away after sex.

Their life wasn't mine. And Adam and Brooke really did look happy together.

What if I could be happy too?

I was happy, and the life in front of them wasn't my path to walk. It was dangerous to entertain dreams of a family, because it would hurt so badly when it didn't happen. Sure, what I was feeling now sucked and I couldn't define the feeling or why, but it was better than the pain I'd feel if I let myself believe I could have more.

It wasn't like I was going to wake up one morning and have the happy, traditional family I used to fantasize about.

It was best I stop sleeping with both Brooke and Adam now. Sure things would be tense for a little while, but then we could go back to the way things were. I didn't want to lose their friendship. That meant far more to me than getting laid sometimes.

And that went for both of them. I couldn't imagine Brooke would be okay with me having a friends-with-benefits relationship with her boyfriend.

I grabbed my coffee and headed down to the shop. While I was deciding where to start, since the shop was closed today, Adam came back. Time to be civil and friendly and start the path toward *we can still be friends*.

"Hey," I called cheerfully.

He didn't pause near the counter, heading toward the back instead. "Hey." He disappeared through the door that led upstairs.

Okay.

I got back to work.

A moment later Adam returned with his camera and laptop bags slung over his shoulder. "I'm heading to Aubrey's to film." He practically bounced rather than standing still.

Aubrey. Right. Someone else I'd fucked up my friendship with. "Tell her I said *hi*."

Adam gave me a look I didn't understand. "Or tell her yourself and make things right while you're there."

"I tried that already."

Adam sighed. "Yeah. All right. I'll be back."

"What was that?" I didn't know how to interpret his tone.

“A sigh.”

Great. I was trying to be friendly and he was being defensive. “Why?”

“You don’t want to know.” Adam adjusted the straps on his shoulder, but didn’t turn away.

I could let him go. That seemed like the logical thing to do. Wish him a genuine *have fun at Aubrey’s* and let both of us get back to what we were doing. “I do want to know. It’s why I asked.”

“Do you keep pushing your friends away so you can ignore your commitment issues?”

I stared at him in disbelief. “What are you, my therapist?”

“Your friend.”

I was starting to wonder. “Aubrey hit on me, and I was honest about how I felt. Is that my fault? Did you see that coming?”

“No.”

“And she refuses to talk to me now. I tried to apologize.”

Adam shrugged. “Try harder.”

Frustration seared through me and I swallowed a growl. “What the fuck do you expect me to do?”

“Maybe admit that Br—ey, Aubrey’s friendship is important, and do more than toss out a couple of obligatory words to make things right.”

And of course this wasn’t really about Aubrey. I clenched my jaw. “Just fucking go.”

I clenched and unclenched my fist several times as Adam walked out the front door.

It didn't matter. There was work to do. The place needed to be straightened, so I could bring up a few show pieces from the basement. The delicate glass collectables in the front window needed to be dusted, I had to catch up on some inventory—

And why the fuck was this place so cluttered?

The thought caught me off-guard and my brain stumbled.

There was an order to the chaos, and it was mine. I'd never had an issue with it before. In a way, it reminded me of Adam—eclectic, diverse, and all over the place.

I clenched my fist harder, until my nails dug into my palm, and forced myself to take several deep breaths through my nose.

The *Addams Family* theme filled the shop, indicating someone had arrived, and I pasted on a pleasant smile.

Until Travis came into view.

“We're closed.” I couldn't find a thread of pleasantness for him.

“With any luck, permanently soon.”

This time I didn't try to fight my growl. “What can I do for you?”

His smile was too bright and friendly. “I'm working my way down the street this morning to remind everyone of the upcoming deadline for the next step in meeting the new building requirements. I notice no one has started yet. *No one*. And I find that disconcerting given the clause that requires you to sell if you can't comply with the rules.”

“I'm sure everyone is working hard on next steps.” I might be in a pissy mood, but that didn't mean I'd sell out my

neighbors.

“Are you sure? Because I hear rumors of a basement remodel, and it seems like that time would’ve been better spent on bringing your shops up to the new code.”

“Have you ever run an antique shop before, Travis?”

He scoffed. “No.”

“A hardware store? A tea shop? A clothing boutique?”

Travis raised his brows. “Your point is?”

“I don’t tell you how to be an asshole, you don’t get to dictate how we upgrade our buildings.”

“But I do. That’s literally part of my job. I don’t know why these people look up to you, but I know they’re more likely to listen to you than me. I’ll continue my way down the street, but reinforce with your friends that I’m fine with shutting you all down if you can’t comply with the city’s building codes, both structurally and visually,” Travis said.

I gave him a tight-lipped grin and did some quick math in my head. Was the pay-off of using him as a punching bag, to work out my frustration, worth the cost of the consequences?

Probably not, but if he stuck around I’d want to find out anyway. “I have work to do. You know where the door is.”

Travis snorted. “I’m fine with things if you keep ignoring this. I win either way.”

I didn’t give him the satisfaction of looking back at him, and a moment later, I heard his footsteps retreat and the door chime sounded again.

As much as I hated the words, Travis was right. The only reason I knew I had a basement was because Brooke helped

me go looking for a way to pay for a remodel, and two weeks later, I was barely closer to getting there. I needed to crack the books and figure out next steps.

At least it would distract me from the nagging in the back of my brain that insisted on replaying last night and the conversation with Adam over and over for no reason other than to torture me.

My cellphone rang, and I hesitated when I saw Brooke's name on the screen.

Fuck it. "Hey." I kept my tone neutral.

"Deacon. I need your help."

My gut sank at the panic in her voice.

brooke

WHEN I STEPPED in my house, Paige and Jamie were asleep in the living room. Not unusually—Jamie had been sleeping over since the girls were little—but the two of them sleeping together on the couch was new.

I should be upset at the sight, right? It was adorable. My only real concern was how Bryan had reacted. It seemed strange that Paige would flaunt any part of this relationship after his reaction.

When I closed the door behind me and locked it, Paige sat up with a start. She looked around the room, her wide-eyed gaze finally falling on me. She looked panicked.

“It’s okay. Just me,” I said softly.

Jamie was stirring too.

“Oh my God, I’m so glad you’re home. I was worried.” Paige sounded more worried than she looked, and that was a high bar.

I gave her a reassuring smile. “Pretty sure that’s my line.” I’d sent her a text last night and she responded, so she knew I’d be gone for the night.

Jamie sat up and squeezed Paige’s hand.

Okay, that was adorable. My baby girl had a girlfriend. Given how worried she looked, now probably wasn't the time to coo over them and try to take pictures.

“Bryan saw your message, and”—Paige glanced at Jamie —“He was really mad last night. He left and he never came back.”

Things had quieted down between the twins over the last week. The shouting had stopped, though they weren't quite on speaking terms yet, and I'd thought they were getting back to normal.

I didn't like the sound of *never came back*. “He didn't tell you where he was going?” How did I miss that their car wasn't in the driveway? Because I just expected it to be there or because I'd been too wrapped up in Adam to pay attention to important things.

“He said he was going to Lucas's house, but when he left he was so mad, I was worried,” Paige said. “Especially when he wouldn't answer my texts.”

This wasn't a big deal. “I'll call and make sure he's okay.” I wanted to ask Paige if this was what it looked like with her and Jamie; it wouldn't do to make assumptions.

Paige glanced next to her and then down at where her hand was tangled with Jamie's. Paige's eyes grew wide again. “I can explain this.” She held up their hands.

“Only when you're ready.” I wasn't worried about Paige dating Jamie as long as they were happy, but I was worried about Bryan. “Go get dressed, I'll call your brother, and make breakfast.”

“Thank you, Ms. Mansell.” Jamie gave me a quick wave and the girls hurried upstairs.

I was definitely taking pictures later. I called Bryan's phone and there was no answer. My worry slipped back—the twins were required to pick up when I called, unless they were driving or working. It seemed unlikely Bryan was still asleep, and he might be driving home, but not if he was mad enough to storm out last night.

I just needed to know he was all right. I called Lucas's mother.

"Morning," Kandace answered in a pleasant tone.

"Hey, it's Brooke. I just need to make sure Bryan's all right." There was no reason to mask my worry, she'd understand.

The silence that came back wasn't reassuring.

"I assume you think he's here," Kandace finally said. "Hang on, let me make sure." I heard her muffled shout of *Lucas*. There was some mumbling. "I haven't seen him in days, and Lucas says he's not around."

Crap. Okay, he must've given Paige the wrong friend's name because he was sulking. "Okay, thank you."

"Brooke." Kandace's tone stopped me before I could hang up. "Call me if you need h—anything."

"I'm sure he's fine. Thank you, though." This wasn't a big deal. I wasn't the mom who freaked out about little things. Bryan had a lot of friends, and I'd only called one.

Ten of his closest friends later with no answer, and no call back from Bryan, and I was willing to admit this wasn't a little thing and I was worried.

I set two plates of pancakes on the table in front of Paige and Jamie, and tried to think of what to try next.

“You could trace his phone.” Jamie looked as at home here as she ever had.

And she was a brilliant young woman. I should’ve done that first. I pulled up the finder app on my phone and told it to look for Bryan.

It pinged with a response telling me the device was less than fifty feet away. What the hell? Would I like to make the device ring? Yes, I very much would.

A muffled chime came from somewhere in the house, and I followed the noise to his room. His phone was sitting on his dresser.

Shit.

This was okay. Bryan was my straight A, never did anything wrong, baby boy. He was fine and I was missing something obvious. I called Colin, who hadn’t seen Bryan. None of my sisters had either. Or my parents.

Panic was setting in.

I called the police and explained the basics of the situation.

“He’s a nearly eighteen-year-old boy with a car, and it’s Sunday,” the officer said kindly but less than helpfully. “He’s fine. Call us again if he’s still not back tomorrow morning.”

“What? No. He could be dead by then.” Yes, that was where my mind was going.

Gregory laughed. “He’s not dead, Brooke. He’s probably just blowing off steam because of the rumors.”

“The... rumors?”

“You know. About you and the guys down on Main Street. You had to know.”

I didn't listen to the town gossip, especially when my name was attached to it, but that wasn't good. Apparently Travis had told everyone what I said after all, about sleeping with both Adam and Deacon. "You people need something else to do besides talk about your neighbors. My son is missing."

"Call back tomorrow morning, and maybe stop acting like the town slut." The line went dead.

I'd be furious about his commentary later, when I knew where Bryan was. I needed someone to help who wasn't one of his friends possibly hiding him, but who knew most of the town and had a knack for getting answers out of anyone.

The town had been talking about me, and it had probably gotten back to the kids. The last thing I wanted. Shit, shit, shit.

I dialed Deacon, ignoring the twinge about how things ended between us last night. It didn't matter. When he answered, I said, "I need your help." It was impossible to keep the worry out of my voice.

"Of course." His answer came without hesitation. Without ever asking *with what?*

I almost cracked when I explained what was going on, because he was kind and concerned the entire time.

"Come down to the shop," he said. "Bring Paige. We'll get everyone together and search."

I appreciated the idea but, "I don't know that walking the streets calling his name is the most efficient use of our time."

"Good point. I'll talk to everyone I know, ask if they've seen him or his car, and then Adam and I are coming over."

“Thank you.” When I hung up, I pressed my back to the wall and sank to the floor.

“Mom?”

I looked up to find Paige studying me with concern. “Hey. Did you girls eat?”

Paige shook her head. “Jamie went home.”

And I didn’t hear it? I was a shitty mom.

“Is Bryan all right?” Paige asked.

Lord, I hoped so. “I’m sure he is.”

“You’re lying. Do you want me to call hospitals?”

My insides twisted in on themselves at the thought, but it needed to be done. “No. I’ll do that. Help me think of anyone at school who might have any idea where he is.”

“Okay.” Paige wandered a few feet away, then paused. “He’s fine. I’d know if he wasn’t fine. Wouldn’t I?”

I nodded. “I’m sure you would.”

Paige didn’t look any more convinced than me as she and I started making more calls.

When Adam and Deacon showed up, neither Paige nor I had any more answers. It should be a relief since it meant Bryan wasn’t in a nearby hospital, but not knowing was eating me alive.

“Any luck?” Adam asked.

I shook my head.

“I thought you said he took the car,” Deacon said.

Why would he say that? My brain stalled and I looked at Paige.

She shrugged. “He did.”

“It’s parked behind the barn. We saw the tail end of it when we pulled in.” Deacon nodded in that direction.

No. I hadn’t missed that. There was no way. But why would Deacon lie?

Paige’s worried expression had morphed, and she was looking between me, Adam, and the door. “I’ll go look in the barn,” she said.

I couldn’t imagine why Bryan would be in there. Had he parked the car out of sight and decided to camp in the woods behind the house, like when they were little? That didn’t make sense, but it made more sense than him being in the barn. “The barn is off limits.”

“I’ll go with her, to make sure it’s safe,” Adam said.

Deacon frowned. “You didn’t check everywhere on the property?”

I did *not* need his judgment right now. “Because that place is supposed to be boarded up. No one goes in there.”

“I’m sure he didn’t.” Paige was lying. “But I’ll just go make sure. Adam will help.”

I was an idiot for not having looked myself. “I’ll go.” I was already heading toward the door, trying not to jump to conclusions and not sure what I hoped to find.

My son, of course, but why did it feel like it wouldn’t be that simple?

Paige trailed behind me, as did the men. When I reached the barn doors, they pushed open without so much as a squeak. Light spilled in through the windows up top, casting the entire room in long shadows and falling on...

Bryan?

What the hell was he sitting on top of?

“Is that a tank in my barn?” Worry had made me hallucinate. That was the only explanation. When no one answered, I scrubbed my eyes and looked again. It looked real enough.

Hours of concern shattered any hold I had on restraint. “Why is there a tank in here?” I asked again. “And where the fuck have you been, Bryan?”

He worked his jaw and pieces clicked in my head.

I whirled on Paige before Bryan could answer. “You knew this was here.” I looked at Adam. “And so did you.” I *knew* that was true. I turned back to Bryan, not giving anyone a chance to reply. Ebbing worry was becoming white-hot anger. “I’ve been calling hospitals.” I could be furious now that I knew he was safe. “Why the fuck is there a tank in my barn?”

“Brooke.” Deacon’s calm voice was the last thing I expected—wanted—to hear.

I focused on him. “Thank you for your help, but I swear to God if you tell me to calm down...”

He held up his hands, as if in surrender. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good.” I pointed to the twins. “Both of you, in the house *now*.” I was torn between screaming and letting ice fill my voice. “Deacon will make sure you get there, because apparently no one else here can be trusted to do that. If I find either of you using your phones when you get in the house, this will be so much worse for you.”

“Mom. I’m so—”

“*Now.*” I cut Bryan off.

As the twins stalked from the barn with Deacon following, I gave Adam my full attention. “There’s a fucking tank in my barn.” I didn’t care that I was repeating myself. Who had time to keep track of words when my world had just crumbled unnecessarily and been shoved back together again? “I thought my son was dead somewhere. I was going to call every hospital in the state. And he was asleep in a barn he’s not supposed to go in, with a tank that you fucking knew about.”

“Brooke.” There was apology in his tone.

And I didn’t want to hear it. Fury and relief were bleeding away the adrenaline rush I’d been riding for hours. “No.” If I listened to him, if I looked at him for too long, I’d remember I cared about him, and there were so many reasons that was a bad idea. “I have to deal with my children.”

Adam walked back to the house with me, and instinct wanted me to drift closer, but I was angry, tired, confused, and relieved, and that all made me a little ill.

Deacon was waiting for us in the living room, and the twins were nowhere to be found. He jerked a thumb toward the stairs. “In their rooms. I told them to leave their doors open so you could see them.”

“Thank you.” I found enough energy to sound sincere, but I couldn’t keep the fury from my voice. “I’ve got it from here.”

He stepped in my path, and I gritted my teeth. It seemed unlikely he could say anything to help right now.

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but you need to stop, breathe, and cool down,” Deacon said.

I gave him a dangerous, disbelieving grin. “You can go now.”

Deacon didn’t move. “Bryan did this for a reason. If you go up there right now, in this mood, will it help?”

Wow, I *could* be more angry. Surprise. “Who the fuck are you to tell me how to raise my children? *My* children. Not yours.” A teensy part of me recognized I shouldn’t take this out on him, and that he may even have a point—even if it wasn’t his place to open his mouth—but it was easy to ignore all of that.

“Okay.” Deacon moved. Smart man. “We’re leaving unless you need anything else.”

“I’m—”

I glared at Adam, silencing him. “Don’t. Seriously. Just. Go,” I said.

Adam reached for me and I stepped away.

Deacon grabbed his arm and tugged him toward the door.

With the house silent, and the twins safe, everything drained from me at once, and I sank onto the bottom step of the stairs. I wanted to scream and cry and rage and laugh. But I didn’t have anything left.

I should go talk to Bryan. To Paige. Deacon was right about screaming being counterproductive. Instead of moving, I dropped my head into my hands.

The day rushed into my mind in a single, suffocating onslaught. The way the morning started waking up next to Adam. How cute it was finding Paige with someone she cared about. The growing horror of realizing Bryan was missing, the calls, the gossip, Adam lying to me...

I fisted clumps of my hair, tugging until my scalp ached.

The thoughts didn't stop.

I should've seen some of this—that Bryan wasn't happy, that Paige was changing, that the twins had managed to put a tank in my barn—but I was too busy spending my time screwing around. I wanted to learn how to date, and my kids had needed me.

What kind of horrible mother did that make me?

Footsteps sounded behind me, soft on the carpet like someone who'd learned where all the creaks in the floor were over the years.

Had Paige been sneaking out?

I couldn't deal with that possibility on top of everything else.

She sat next to me on the stairs. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

"For what?" As far as I could tell, she was the most innocent in all of this. "You didn't do anything."

"I made Bryan mad, by dating Jamie."

"No. Don't ever feel bad about that." At least I could do one thing right. "He doesn't get a say in who you date. Ever."

Paige laughed weakly. "But he wouldn't have left last night otherwise. Besides, the tank is my fault. The fact that Adam kept it a secret is my fault. I wasn't going to use it for anything bad; it was supposed to be a surprise. It's not loaded, the gun doesn't work as far as I know, but I wanted to restore it. I wanted to prove to everyone that I could. I made Adam promise—"

“You’re also not responsible for him lying to me.” There was a block in my head angry at me for falling for him, and needing it to be his fault.

Paige leaned into me. “I’m still sorry. I didn’t want to upset you. Have you ever said *fuck* that much before?”

“Probably not in the entirety of my life.” I wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “You should’ve told me you had a tank.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“Yes.”

“Grounded?”

I was tempted to ground both of them for the next several months, just so I’d always know where they were. “No. But you do have to go clean up the breakfast no one ate and do the dishes.”

“Now?”

I kissed her on the forehead. “Now.” My voice was soft.

Paige headed into the kitchen, and I pushed to my feet to go talk to Bryan. He was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Why did you have to call *them*?” he asked.

“Because I thought you were dead in a ditch somewhere and I knew they could help.”

Bryan rolled his head to the side and looked at me. “Every time that truck pulls into our driveway, the entire town talks about you.”

“The entire town has been talking about me since I dared move here with two children and no husband.”

“And yet, you keep doing the things that make them talk. And you let Paige do them.”

“Enough.” I would let him air his frustrations, but some statements couldn’t go unchallenged. “Paige is hardly flaunting her relationship, and even if she is, she has as much of a right as anyone. And I’ve been friends with Deacon for a long time.”

“But you’ve only been bragging about sleeping with him recently.”

Ice settled in the pit of my stomach. I’d like to argue I hadn’t bragged, but that was exactly what I’d done to Travis.

“And maybe you don’t like it here, and if so, why did you drag us here? Because now I’m here, and I like it here, and unlike Paige I’m not desperate to leave, and I don’t like having to hear people talk about you.” Bryan’s voice was raw.

There was a lot to unpack there. “I can’t live my life based on what other people think.” The words were easy to say, but today they dug deep, insisting I give them a closer look and be a little more honest with my son and myself. I didn’t have the time for that.

“But every time someone calls you the town slut, I have to decide whether to pretend I don’t care, or deck them. You’re lucky the only thing I did was hide in the barn.”

“Don’t you dare threaten me.” I didn’t want to get mad again. “We’re having a civil conversation, and you can be an adult about it.”

Bryan sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “I’m surprised you noticed. I’m surprised you noticed I was gone.”

Guilt met reemerging anger. “Of course I noticed.” Deacon’s words echoed in my thoughts. Yelling wasn’t going to make this better, but I so badly wanted to. “I was worried about you. We called most of the town, and every hospital in a fifty-mile radius, looking for you. That’s why Deacon and Adam were here. Not for me, but to help look for you.”

I sat next to him on the bed, forcing myself to look more calm. “Why were you hiding in the barn?”

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” he relented. “I didn’t want to be here with just Paige and Jamie and I wasn’t in the mood to hang out with my friends. I’m so sick of everyone talking about how they can’t wait to get away from this place when they graduate. What’s wrong with being here? With staying here?”

I knew Bryan wanted to go to a local college, but it hadn’t occurred to me he didn’t have the same wanderlust his sister did. How did I not know that about my own kid? “Nothing’s wrong with that.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” He huffed and lay back on his bed. “I’m sorry I scared you. I don’t think you’re the town slut. I’ll make sure to take my phone with me next time I go hide in the shed.”

“Bryan...” I didn’t know what to say.

He rolled on his side, back to me. “The tank was uncomfortable. I’m going to sleep.”

I could dig in my heels on the punishment. Make him go clean something. Force him to stay up all day. But guilt was beating out everything else, leaving me feeling defeated.

I’d told myself for a long time that I didn’t live my life based on other people’s opinions, but was that true? A nagging

voice in the back of my head asked if the town talking played any part in why I'd been single until now. But I had two lives I needed to be worried about. Two children I should be giving my all to. I needed to be here for Paige. For Bryan. I had to be a part of my kids' lives for as long as they needed me.

Nothing else was more important.

adam

WE NEED to dial things back for a while. I'm sorry.

I stared in disbelief at the text from Brooke as I sat behind the counter in Deacon's shop. We had been trying to make plans for the rest of the day when I got her message.

Dial things back. What does that mean? I replied.

Three bouncing dots taunted me as she typed. After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only a few seconds, her message popped up.

I can't see you anymore.

No. Uh-uh. She had *not* just dumped me over text. No way. "Fuck this. I'm going back to Brooke's."

Deacon stared at me in disbelief. "Not a good idea. She needs time to cool down."

"And I need to make things right." I showed him the brief exchange. As soon as he'd flicked his gaze over the screen then looked away, I dialed her number... and went straight to voicemail. "Brooke, what is this? Talk to me, please?" I kept my tone contrite in the message, but as soon as I hung up, my scowl was back. I hopped from the stool. "I'll be back."

I jerked to a stop when Deacon grabbed my arm and held tight. “You’ll let Brooke calm down.”

“Fuck you.” I jerked free from his grasp and whirled to face him. “Just because you can’t figure out who and what you want doesn’t mean I’m going to just let someone incredible walk away.”

Shit. What did I just say?

The truth.

The way Deacon watched me, his expression blank except for his clenched jaw, said he’d heard it too. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t.” I cut off my laugh and shook my head. “And I’m not in the mood to explain it to you.” I needed to figure out what was going on with Brooke. Get her back. “I’m out.” I strode toward the back door.

Deacon caught up with me in the doorway that separated the main shop from the back room and grabbed my wrist.

I whirled, slammed my palm against his chest, and pressed him to the doorframe. “Don’t.” I bit off the word.

He gripped my arm with both hands, locking us both in place. Heat and frustration flowed between us in a potent closed circuit that threatened to fry my thoughts. “I’m definitely not letting you leave while you’re like this,” Deacon said.

“Why not?” This time I didn’t try to pull away. I pressed in closer until we were nose-to-nose.

“Because if you go over there in this mood, you’ll make things worse.”

“Or maybe it’s because you can’t stand this. You can’t stand being forced to look at what you could’ve had but gave up. You can’t stand thinking about how emotionally stunted you are when it comes to love. You can’t stand that you could’ve had her—me—and you don’t.”

Wait. What? This had never been about Deacon and me.

I was angry enough I couldn’t think about it. He’d had Brooke and gave her up, and now he wanted me to do the same and I wasn’t going to.

“What do you want from me?” Deacon growled.

“I want you to admit Brooke is more than just a fuck. That *I* am.” With the words out there, they were real. My breath came in jagged pants and I held his gaze, refusing to look away.

Fuck. I didn’t mean to say that. I didn’t know I meant that.

Deacon wasn’t answering. He was just watching me with the same kind of shock I felt.

Fuck it. I gripped his shirt tightly in my fist, finished closing the distance between us, and crushed my mouth to his.

He kissed back hard enough our teeth clashed. Our tongues fought. His grunts mixed with mine.

It was the middle of the day, and while we weren’t exactly in front of the windows, we weren’t hidden from sight either.

But the doors were locked—it wasn’t like anyone was going to walk in on us, and if they caught a glimpse from outside, they were welcome to watch.

I worked my hands down the front of Deacon’s shirt, ripping off as many buttons as I managed to undo in my desperation. Shoving the clothing off his shoulders left red

burn marks on his skin and I followed the path with hard bites that left visible marks along his chest and shoulders.

His grunts fueled the flames raging inside me, and when he pulled my T-shirt up, I only broke away long enough to let him yank it over my head. The sound of tearing fabric added to the need flooding my veins.

I scraped my teeth over his skin and kept him pinned to the wall. He dropped his hand to grip my cock through my jeans, the friction building until I ached from the way he stroked me.

Frustration and anger and lust churned inside me until my brain didn't work and all I could think about was the man I was knotted up with. His hard body pressing into mine, the taste of his skin, of his kisses, and bringing him to his knees. Not physically. Not this time. But I wanted him to surrender to the truth.

My hips worked on their own, thrusting against the air, and shoving me into his touch.

I dragged his zipper down, and he grunted when I wrapped my fingers around his bare shaft.

I lost myself in jerking him, in the way his fingers dug into me through denim. It was pleasure and agony in a perfectly chaotic blend, until pleasure swelled to a crescendo inside me.

Deacon slammed hard against my fist, fucking as much as I was beating, and his entire body tensed. Need tightened in my balls, but I was focused on him.

When he came, it was with a loud cry, covering my hand with cum as he shuddered under my touch. His release granted me a strange satisfaction, and he never loosened his grip on me. I fucked the air. His hand. I hovered so near the edge of climax, there was no turning back.

I came hard in my jeans like I was a fucking teenager again, orgasm shuddering through my body. Pressing my hands to the wall on either side of Deacon's head, I used the sturdy structure to steady myself. To catch my breath.

We both stood there not saying anything, panting, the world moving on around us and not caring who we were. What we'd done or the mess we'd made.

The problem was, I still did. I cared who we were, and that it wasn't what we should be. That something was broken between Deacon and me, and that Brooke might as well be eons away instead of just on the other side of town.

I needed to make them both understand and I had no idea how to do that. Deacon didn't protest as I pushed away and headed toward the stairs. Fine. Fuck him. I needed to clean up.

In the bathroom, I stripped out of my clothes on auto-pilot.

The shower was too hot, but I didn't care. It washed away what was on the surface, and it seared my frustration into my soul.

I scrubbed too hard, drying myself off, and it didn't matter.

On the drive to Brooke's, my mind was a chaotic mess. The wheels on my car spun freely, looking for traction when I pulled into her driveway, and I skidded to a stop.

On her front porch, I hammered on the door with the side of my fist, until Brooke answered. Her arms were crossed, and she stared at her feet.

"Talk to me." I tried to keep my voice even.

She shook her head. "I already said what I needed to."

"No. This isn't fair. It isn't *right*." I bit the word off rather than letting it bark out. "You owe me—"

“Nothing.” Brooke finally met my gaze. “I don’t *owe* you anything. I can’t see you anymore. That’s that.”

It wasn’t, because it couldn’t be. Was I the delusional one? No. She belonged with me. With us. “Brooke, please.”

“Go home. I don’t have anything else to say.” Her voice cracked. She swung the door shut again before I could say more.

No. No, no, no, no, no. This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. I sank to the cold concrete of her porch, her door at my back, and dropped my head into my hands.

What was I doing wrong? Why didn’t she see it? Was I the asshole here?

None of this made sense.

I lost track of how long I sat there, but enough time passed that my ass went numb. Lights flashed in the driveway and a new car pulled up next to mine.

Sebastian climbed out and approached. I watched him blankly, not able to summon a thought. He stopped in front of me. “Go home. Or anywhere but here.”

“Why did she call you?”

Sebastian shrugged. “She’s mad at Deacon, too? I didn’t ask and whatever’s going on, you’re not making it better.”

Yeah, apparently I *was* the asshole.

But I still didn’t know what I’d done wrong, or how to fix it.

deacon

AFTER THE SEX—THE fucking? The mutual masturbation. I wasn't sure it could be called anything else—I let Adam shower then walk out. It wasn't like we were going to cuddle, and if he was hellbent on talking to Brooke, let him.

That didn't mean I could get his words out of my head.

I tried.

I tried to shove them out with loud music and hard labor, cranking the stereo while I worked in the basement.

He was back hours later, a scowl on his face.

I knew better than to ask how it went. I wasn't surprised, but I had hoped he'd get the answer he wanted from Brooke.

We exchanged grunts more than words as he helped me finish my work. The list wasn't long but those final touches were the things that took the most time. The basement had to look *just right*.

When we were done, we headed upstairs. I didn't have any more answers than earlier, but I'd burned off most of my frustration and was just left with exhausted confusion.

"I need another fucking shower." Adam stripped off his shirt as we walked into the apartment.

It was tempting to offer to join him, but I didn't want that to be how I knocked loose the thoughts screaming for my attention. I'd risk him using all the hot water before I did that. "You go ahead."

He studied me, his brow furrowed, then shook his head and walked into the bathroom.

I collapsed on my bed, and that gave my brain permission to assault me. To remind me how much it hurt this morning when Brooke reminded me her family wasn't mine. *My children. Not yours.*

Of course it was true, but it hurt regardless. The simple exchange tied to my past. To children I thought *were* mine. To losing a family that never really belonged to me, for the second time in my life.

And what Adam said when we got back... The accusations. The observations.

I want you to admit Brooke is more than just a fuck. That I am.

I scrubbed my hand over my barely-there hair.

What did I really want?

If I said the words, if I even thought them...

Was I prepared for the way that would change everything?

MONDAY MORNING DIDN'T BRING any new answers, but at least it brought the distraction of work. There was already a short line of people outside when I got downstairs, and Adam was doing some last-minute straightening.

“You posted the first video.” How had I almost forgotten we were doing a soft grand-opening of the basement today? That and it was President’s Day. More people always showed today, and I’d always thought buying furniture was an odd way to celebrate presidents.

Adam looked at me with his lips pursed, and his nostrils flared when he inhaled. “Of course I did. I told you I would.” His tone wasn’t angry, but it wasn’t kind either.

“Thank you.” I meant it.

We were almost ready to unlock the doors when A loud pounding came from the back of the building. I sprinted back to find out who was hammering on the door, and unlocked it to find Aubrey on the other side.

“Oh.” She let out a soft huff. “It’s you.”

“It’s my place.” I was happy to see her, to talk to her, even if she hadn’t said much. I hadn’t changed my mind about how I felt, but I did want my friend back. “About the other night —”

She held up her index finger, silencing me. “Later. That line in front of your shop is doubling the population of the town.”

“Not quite.” But if things grew over the week, it might by the official grand re-opening on Saturday.

Aubrey almost smiled. “I’m hoping I see the same when Adam’s video with the dresses goes live, so I’m also hoping you can have someone bring the rest of them over if you can spare a body for an hour today.”

“I’ll find a way.”

Dylan shouted my name and I glanced back toward the main floor of the shop. Damn it, I really wanted to make things right with Aubrey.

With Adam.

With Brooke.

But Aubrey was here.

And what I had to say to Adam and Brooke reached a lot deeper into my heart, and would rip me open a lot wider.

“Go,” she said. “I have a place to open too.”

And that was the last thought I had about anything but antiques and how much they were worth for the next ten hours. We opened the doors at ten, locked them at seven, and haggled with stragglers until eight.

When I finally collapsed onto one of the stools behind the counter, exhaustion caught up to me. That was possibly the best day I’d ever seen this place have. People had driven in from other states. Not just Wyoming and Idaho, but Washington and Montana.

“Good day?” Aubrey’s question startled me and I realized she had joined Adam and me.

“Holy shit, you scared the fuck out of me.” My tired brain paused to remind me it was unusual to see her here, since she was mad at me, and that I’d forgotten to send her dresses over. “I’m so sorry. We didn’t have anyone free.” That was true.

“I kind of figured,” she said. “That’s why I’m here.”

“We’ll bring things over now.” Adam was already on his feet.

My back ached just thinking about it—silk was a lot heavier in bulk than it looked—but Aubrey’s was one door over and I owed her.

As Adam headed into the back room, I stopped Aubrey. “You have to hear me out first.”

“You’re going to put conditions on us doing business?” Aubrey didn’t look impressed. “What are you going to say? That you’re sorry for not liking me? That you still want to be friends? I get that.”

I shrugged. “I’d say it more kindly than last time.”

“We’ll get there, D, but give me time.”

It was a reasonable request. “How much time?”

Aubrey rolled her eyes. “I guess it depends on how much it hurts when I have to see you with Brooke every day.”

“I’m not with Brooke.” But *fuck* I wanted to be. Now that I’d finally allowed myself to think it, the reality of how much I wanted her hit me hard.

“You guys coming?” Adam poked his head back in the room.

Or him. I wasn’t with either of them, and I wanted to be. That was a jagged, bitter truth to swallow, since I’d been working so hard to make the opposite happen.

“You’re such an idiot. So’s she.” Aubrey hopped from the stool. “Faster we get this done, faster you can go ice your back, old man.”

“Give it a few days, until your lines are out the door, and see how you feel, Grandma.” I fell into step beside Aubrey as we headed toward the basement.

She stuck her tongue out at me.

Over the next few days, things slowed to busy rather than hectic. Which made sense—the big antique hunters worked to get here first, and the rest would take their time. But we were putting out a bigger word on Friday, in hopes of drawing a huge crowd on Saturday.

The stream of customers didn't stop me from wondering if Travis was freaking out about the Main Street parking situation.

But more, it didn't stop me from noticing how absent Brooke was. For the third week in a row. Last weekend was supposed to mean she was back.

“Earth to Deacon.” Adam's sharp whistle caught my attention. At least he was talking to me, though it had barely been about anything but business. “Dylan's taking off.”

He couldn't. Not until all the customers were gone. I looked around the showroom floor. Oh. It was seven and we'd gotten everyone out. “Yeah. Okay.” I shooed Dylan out and locked the doors behind him.

“Wow, a whole Thursday night to ourselves,” Adam said. “Whatever will we do with our time?”

“Sleep. For a billion years.” And pop some ibuprofen.

Adam shook his head. “I can give you until Saturday.”

“A day and a half is like a billion years.”

He snorted. “I'm so glad I don't draw a paycheck from you. I'd hate to see how you do tax deductions.”

I shook my head and went to lock the front door.

Bryan slipped in before I reached my destination. Disappointment splashed inside that he was alone, but of course he was.

“What can I do for you?” I asked.

“I want a job.”

Not what I expected. I turned and headed back to the counter, talking over my shoulder as I walked. I could give him the same joke I gave everyone, that I only hired people whose names started with *D*, but there was an echo in the back of my head. Brooke reminding me these were *her* kids. “I’m not hiring.”

“You should be. You’re busy.”

It was a little petty of me to cling to her statement, but it was easier to focus on that comment than the one she never made. “Why do you want a job all the sudden? And why from me?”

“I... want to impress a girl.”

“Pretty sure Paige’s friend made up her mind there,” Adam chimed in when we reached him.

Adam didn’t like Brooke dumping him via text, but at least he got a text. Then again, I was the one who kept insisting Brooke and I were just friends. I couldn’t be upset at her for my own inability to see, and that hurt.

“How do you know about that? Does everyone know?” Bryan asked.

Adam shrugged. “Paige told me. I doubt she told everyone. She’s your sister—do you think she told anyone else?”

Bryan’s scowl was etched deep. “No. And this isn’t about Jamie.”

“You can’t just hop from one girl to the next.” Was I talking to him or myself? I opened the register, but didn’t touch the day’s receipts.

Bryan made a growling noise that reminded me of Brooke when she was frustrated. “It’s not like that. I’m doing the right thing. Helping her out.”

“What right thing? Help her out with what?” Adam’s confusion sounded exaggerated.

I wasn’t sure if I should laugh or smack him.

“Nothing.” Bryan shifted some things around on the counter. “Look. I’m already fitting in.”

I put everything back where it had been. There was an order to these things. *Please don’t make me keep a secret like this from Brooke.* Not that I could. “Does this *nothing* you’re helping *a friend* out with start with a *B*?”

“Pregnancy doesn’t start with—I mean, *no*.”

Yup. He’d gotten someone pregnant and that was going to be the less-than-ideal excuse I needed to call Brooke. Why did I need an excuse? I’d never needed one before.

“*Baby* starts with *B*,” Adam said.

“No.” Bryan sounded frustrated. “I’m not hopping from girl to girl, and it’s not mine. But she is a good friend, and I can’t tell you who and she doesn’t want the dad to know, and her parents are going to kill her if they find out—you know how uptight some of the people here are—and she just needs to get enough money for a bus ticket to her aunt’s house in Oregon. There aren’t a lot of job options in this town, and you obviously need help, at least for a few days. You’re sleeping with my mom, so you have to give me preference.”

“Give you preference?” Adam repeated the oddly formal phrase.

There was a lot to unpack in this conversation. “I’m not sleeping with Brooke.” Was that really what I should be focusing on right now? He was talking about helping a pregnant girl run away. “Did you not learn less than a week ago what happens when kids disappear without telling their parents?”

“Look. I need some extra cash, okay? Can we just leave it at that? Hire me for the weekend, I’ll tell you I’m spending it on comics if that helps you feel better, and it’ll get you back into my mom’s good graces, and maybe she’ll stop moping around the house.”

Something still didn’t feel right about his story. Like he was working too hard to give us a tale we’d grab onto and ignore what was really happening. But I’d circle back to that, because I was hung up on the fact that Brooke was moping over us. Wait.

“Who said I was the one who needed to get back in her good graces?” I asked.

Bryan nodded at Adam. “He came to visit her almost every day while her ankle was sprained.”

“Adam’s on the outs too.” I didn’t like this direction. “Who’s the money really for?”

Bryan clamped his jaw shut and shook his head.

“All right. We’re going to go grab dinner.” I closed the register again and turned away. “Call me when you want to give me a real answer.”

“Fine, it’s for Paige, okay,” Bryan spit out.

Adam looked surprised. “I don’t think Paige is pregnant. Do you need the birds and the bees talk?”

The look Bryan shot him was deadly. “She’s only been with Jamie for a week, and she’s not pregnant.” He sighed. “She has a chance to apply for an apprenticeship on the other side of the country. She sent a video of her and the tank to a NASCAR pit boss, and he wants to talk to her. She has to go to the interview in person, and this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. She could learn from NASCAR people.”

“That’s fantastic.” This sounded more real to me. But why did it take him so long to get here?

“It is. Except”— Bryan let out another sigh—“she’s terrified of going.”

“How do you know?” Adam asked.

“She keeps making excuses and she made me swear on my life not to tell Mom. So Paige can’t afford to go. I figure if I give her the money for the trip, she’ll be out of excuses.”

“And if you tell us, it gets back to Brooke.” And if anyone asked, he could say we dragged the answer out of him, because we’d all but done exactly that.

Convoluting, but clever. He’d been watching way too many movies. Sounded like our kind of guy.

“You can help me clean up the shop tonight,” I said. “If you call your mom and tell her where you are.” I wasn’t putting Brooke in a panic over a missing kid again.

Bryan rolled his eyes. “Fine.” He grinned. “And thank you.”

I really wanted to make things right with Brooke, and this wasn’t the way to do it. Maybe I’d start with Adam and see if

he was willing to forgive me for being dense, and then we'd talk to her.

Maybe.

brooke

“I’LL BE HOME LATE,” Bryan said. “I’m working for Deacon now.”

When I heard that name over the phone, a fist clenched around my heart, leaving an ache in its place. “Let me talk to him.”

“What?” Bryan sounded surprised.

“You heard me. Put Deacon and Adam on FaceTime, so I know you’re really there.” And so I could hear their voices and see their faces. Mostly the first, but I hoped Bryan had learned his lesson as far as lying about where he was, so almost as much the second.

Bryan huffed. “Mom, I’m not lying.”

“So put them on.” If he was lying, I’d ground him for life. Maybe that was what he wanted? I didn’t know anymore.

The noise on the line changed, and a heartbeat later Bryan appeared on screen, next to Deacon, “Hi, Brooke.”

“Hello.” Adam was there as well.

They sounded so good. Better than should be allowed considering they hadn’t said much of anything. They looked better. “Hey. Are you sure this is all right?”

“Of course.” Deacon’s reply came without hesitation.

“As long as he can do math,” Adam said. “Apparently Deacon thinks a billion is the same as one and a half, so we need some help in the counting department.”

It sounded like Deacon was clearing his throat. “I can count. One, two”—he held up fingers as he ticked off numbers, and finished with his middle finger extended, flipping off Adam—“three hundred seventy. Fuck.”

Adam sucked Deacon’s middle finger into his mouth, and Deacon looked like he was biting back a groan.

How did I walk away from this kind of easy fun? I didn’t want to give them up, but I had kids to worry about.

And Bryan moved into the shot alone, as if to drive home the thought. “Flirt later. Boss says we have work to do.”

I was certain Deacon hadn’t said that, but I needed to end the call anyway. “Okay. Call if you’re going to be too late.”

Bryan hung up, but the teensy morsel of phone call with Adam and Deacon lingered in my thoughts and heart. I didn’t like not seeing them. Not talking to them. But I also couldn’t stand the thought of abandoning the twins. Making them put up with gossip. With a negligent mom.

Or I’m terrified of letting myself fall in love again.

The thought side-swiped me and I fumbled with it.

“Mom?” Paige’s voice saved me from my own thoughts and I looked up to find her in the doorway of my office. “You’re sitting in here alone with a dorky look on your face. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” A little confused, but good. “What’s up?”

“I need to show you something.”

My heart dropped into my shoes at her hesitant tone. “Show me what?”

“Nothing bad. I hope.” She stepped into my office, her voice and body language doing anything but reassuring me.

Paige pulled an empty chair closer to mine, so she was sitting next to me in front of my laptop. “So I’ve been trying to figure out how a tank got in our barn,” she said.

It had taken her a little time to convince me she didn’t move it in piece by piece, but I did believe her now.

“I can’t find much of anything except that the man who owned this place before us, his grandfather brought it home at the end of World War I. There are photos of it arriving on the train.”

It was a strange story that left me with more questions than answers, but it didn’t explain the way she was acting. “Okay?”

“But while I was looking... Can I?” She nodded at my computer.

I rolled out of the way to give her access.

Paige moved in, and her fingers flew across the keyboard. She opened several tabs, and I caught a glimpse of each, most of the pages looking like basic, early internet days sites. The kind with busy backgrounds and lots of text.

“I know why Deacon has a basement, and why there’s that stuff in it,” she said. “His great, great grandparents owned a lot more of that block when the city was founded. And, well...” Paige gestured at the screen she’d stopped on.

The Unbelievably True Story of Utah’s First Brothel

I stared in disbelief at the headline. “No way.”

“I did a lot of cross referencing”—she gestured at the other tabs—“and it looks like it’s true. They opened it for miners, and the state shut it down, boarded it up, and made them surrender most of the street-level property.”

“Wow.” I scrolled through the page, skimming every third word—enough to pick up the meaning—this is... *wow*.”

“Right?” Paige sounded excited. “You’re fucking someone who owns a part of sex history.”

“I’m not...” *fucking him*. I sighed. I wanted to be. I wanted to be more with Deacon. I wanted to go back to Adam. Why did I push them away?

“Why not?” Paige’s question echoed my thoughts.

Because of her and Bryan?

Because I was scared.

There was that thought again, and this time I couldn’t shake it. “I don’t know.”

Paige sank lower in her seat. “I get that.”

But the idea of pushing past this fear brought so many arguments. Deacon had already balked at the idea of more. More than once. There was no reason for him to change his mind.

But Adam had plenty of reasons that all went back to him realizing there was so much more out there than me for him.

It was a lot less painful to tell myself I was keeping my distance for the twins’ sake.

I looked back at the various sites Paige had pulled up on my computer, about Deacon’s building. There was something I

could do that had nothing to do with sex or romance.

Okay, it had a lot to do with sex, but not sex with me.

I didn't suspect that having a place declared a historical site was as easy as they made it on TV, but I was going to figure it out.

I spent the next several hours learning everything I could about the process, and didn't go to bed until my eyes were too dry to make sense of words anymore. Friday morning I was back at it, including calling in a favor with a friend who worked at our town hall, to help me answer some questions on the paperwork.

Turning onto Main Street filled me with a mix of nervous anticipation and dread, from memories of every time I'd come down here to visit the antique shop, and knowing I wasn't going there today.

I parked out of sight of their shop windows, mostly because I was a Grade A coward and would cave and make a fool of myself if I ran into either man. I wasn't thinking about the fact that I'd have to go talk to them after this, to share the good news. Instead, I cut through the back alley across the street.

As I drew closer to the City building, a strange noise caught my attention, and I paused. Grunting? No. Not when I strained. Murmuring. Like voices. Definitely.

It wasn't polite to eavesdrop, but curiosity won out. I followed the sound toward two buildings with a barely-there gap between them, and found two men with a barely-there gap between them. Their foreheads were pressed together, one with his hands resting at the base of the other's neck as they muttered words I couldn't make out.

“Travis?” His name slipped past my lips before I could stop it.

They both looked up, startled.

“Oh, crap.” The younger man paled when he saw me, and sprinted off in the other direction without another word.

I knew him, as well. Manny was the current bishop’s oldest son. He was also barely twenty-two, and had just gotten back from a church mission in Uruguay.

For the most part, I didn’t care what anyone did with anyone else, as long as it was consensual, but given the grief Travis had tossed at me over the years—the self-righteous, snotty, gossipy bullshit—it was hard not to act smug right now.

“Don’t say anything.” Travis strode toward me. His strong tone was in sharp contrast to the fact that his eyes darted in every direction. “You’ve been with younger men, too.”

I could play the *but I’m a woman* card, but really that felt slimy. Even now. “I have. And thank you for telling the entire town about that, by the way.”

“You can’t keep something like that a secret.”

Was he really trying to make this about me? No thank you. “You’re right, you can’t.” It was so tempting to rake him over the coals with this, but I wasn’t him. I did have one issue with what I’d seen though—I couldn’t help but wonder how I’d feel if it was one of my kids, barely older than they were now, with a manipulative, cruel asshole who was Travis’s age. “Big difference is, Adam and Deacon are only a few years younger than me, not nearly two decades. This will get out. You know that, don’t you?”

“Are you threatening me?”

Adam would've drawn a Beavis comparison at this point. I missed him. "No. I'm not a gossip. I'm telling you how it is. If I caught you, someone else will." Though it was so tempting to shout this from the rooftops. Was I a good enough person to keep it to myself?

Manny didn't deserve the whispers, even if Travis should be subjected to much worse.

"Why are you here?" Travis asked.

Not a great attempt to redirect the conversation, but not bad. "Not to talk to you. In fact, I have an appointment in"—I checked my watch—"two minutes. I need to go."

"Wait." Travis grabbed my arm.

I shot him a withering glare and he let go.

"Please don't tell anyone about this." The strength was gone from his voice.

I didn't plan on it, so I gave him a shrug.

"What are you meeting about? What can I help with? Anything. You name it."

Was Travis going through the seven stages of getting caught? Were we on bargaining? I had no idea what came next. "I'm having this block declared a historic site, which means you can't force the stores to make changes."

He went paler—so that was possible—and worked his jaw up and down, a bit like a fish gasping in air. "They're good plans, Brooke. I just want this block to look gorgeous."

"This block is already amazing. How do you not see that? We're not like other Main Streets with half the shops boarded up and the other half trying to pretend they're modern. We sparkle and shine."

Travis scoffed. “Great. I’ll have you write the marketing brochures.”

“And I need to go.”

“Wait. Please.” Sweet-Travis was back. “What if I promise you right now I’ll get the new requirements reversed. No changes.”

“I’m about to do that anyway, and honestly your word isn’t worth crap.”

“I won’t fight it. I’ll step aside right now, just don’t tell anyone what you saw.”

“Over a guy?” I didn’t believe that. Then again, I’d give up a lot for Adam and Deacon. I was an idiot for giving them up. Besides, I didn’t care that Travis wanted to screw men, I just cared that the one he picked was so young, and Travis was so fucking manipulative.

“If this gets out, my career...” Travis gave me a look that said *don’t make me finish this thought*.

“You’ll be screwed in a whole new way. I really need to keep going.”

“I’ll walk you in.” Travis fell into step beside me.

I couldn’t stop him from walking where he wanted to, and it felt wrong to manipulate this situation to my advantage, especially since I didn’t plan to tell anyone what I saw. But was there really any harm in letting Travis continue to believe everyone in the world was the same kind of asshole he was?

But was I really that much better than him? He was keeping his relationship quiet, and I was so scared of my relationships that I’d ended them before they got off the ground.

I was tired of making excuses about why I couldn't be with Deacon and Adam. It was time for me to step up. To go after them, regardless of what the rest of the world thought about us.

adam

DEACON and I were discussing the pros and cons of closing the shop right after lunch, to spend the second half of Friday getting ready for the Official Basement Grand Opening, when Bryan walked into the shop.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” I wasn’t up for keeping any more secrets from Brooke.

He didn’t look bothered by the question. “Nope. Fridays I get half a day for college courses in Salt Lake, but those were canceled. So I’m here for more work.”

“You can’t just set your own schedule,” Deacon said.

“I’m taking initiative. Besides, Paige is on a timer, even if she won’t admit it.”

Hard to argue with that.

Deacon grabbed his keys. “Right. We’re closing early, and Bryan can start bringing the rest of the clothing over to Aubrey’s.”

For the next couple of hours, we worked without much conversation beyond Deacon’s direction. The manual labor was exhausting, but it was a different kind of tiring than dealing with people who wanted everything for nothing, like we’d seen so many times this week.

Some days I didn't know how Deacon put up with it, but he loved it, and I loved watching him do it.

I loved...

Yeah, I did.

"Hey." Bryan interrupted the thought. "What's with the dopey look?"

I'd linger on love later. "I'm just lucky—I have a naturally dopey face. Aren't you moving end tables?"

"Pft. I'm going. Slave driver." Bryan's tone was light as he walked away.

"You're the one who wanted a job," Deacon called after him.

Deacon had a handful of *full room* setups around the shop, similar to what one would find in a furniture store. He set up the displays to keep sets together or to show how mismatched sets could work together, and he tended to rotate them out every so often.

The exception to the rule was the set Bryan had stopped next to. "This has been here for a while, hasn't it? We could swap it out."

This was one of the matching sets, from the pair of antique cribs to the matching dressers and wooden rocker. The set never moved. Deacon had refused every offer on it, regardless of price or whether the person wanted one piece or the whole set.

"No." Deacon's bark came out of nowhere.

I knew why, but that didn't mean the response was warranted, and Bryan's surprised expression said he agreed. "Okay. We won't move it," Bryan said.

“Sorry,” Deacon muttered. “The set stays. We’ll move other things.”

It had been so many years, and that wound was still fresh for Deacon. I got it, though. There were days when memories of my dad still hit me like he’s just been here yesterday.

The silence that settled in was stifling.

“Was it ours?” Bryan asked out of nowhere.

Deacon stared at him. “What?”

“You’re in love with my mom, right? Widow moves to town with two kids, she needs a place to hawk some of their old stuff—”

“It’s not yours.” Deacon’s tone had gone from over the top angry to almost mechanical. “And I didn’t own the shop when Brooke moved here.”

There was no denial of *I’m not in love with her*. Not that I could blame him—some lies were hard to keep up. I was willing to admit I loved Brook as much as I did Deacon, and with any luck, he’d figure it out soon too.

“Your family did.” Either Bryan couldn’t read a room, or he was enjoying pushing Deacon’s buttons.

Deacon shrugged. “Not sure what your point is.”

My phone chirped with a text message from my brother. It read, *I’m here*.

“Brandon’s out back to pick up the lights,” I said. “Saved by the bell,” I muttered quietly enough only Deacon should hear me.

Deacon rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

Whatever indeed. I wouldn't push the issue, especially in front of other people, but I would like it if he opened up to me at some point.

As we loaded the borrowed lights into Brandon's SUV, Deacon had gone quiet, most likely lost in the past, with the memories that belonged to that furniture set.

There were so many times when Deacon had pulled me out of a funk over the course of our friendship—after fights with Brandon, after my ex left, when my business partner torched my plans and my home, on the anniversary of my dad's death...

Deacon was always there for me, and as soon as everyone left today, I was going to make sure he had whatever he needed, whether that was talking, silence, or sex. Was the last one an unhealthy outlet for grief? Probably. But I'd do a lot for him.

"Hey, you ever see that really old movie, *Aliens*?" Bryan asked, as we finished loading the last of the gear into Brandon's SUV, and closed the doors.

Brandon's snort was one I'd heard too many times in my life. It was *you can't be serious right now*.

I had a similar response, but with a very different emotion behind it. "I can't believe you just asked me that."

"So, yes?" Bryan said.

"I'm ready, man, check it out," I shouted in my best Hudson voice, quoting a specific scene from *Aliens* special edition. "State of the art badass art. You do not want to fuck with me."

Bryan grinned. "Hey, Ridley, don't worry." He looked at Brandon. "Me and my squad of ultimate badasses will protect

you. Check it out—independently targeting particle beam phalanx.”

“*Vwap.*” I added the sound effects. “Fry half a city with this puppy.”

Bryan picked it up again without pause. “We got tactical smart missiles, phased plasma pulse rifles, RPGs, and sonic electronic ball breakers.”

I joined in at the end, and we spoke at the same time. “We got nukes, knives, sharp sticks—”

“Knock it off, Hudson.” Deacon slapped my arm lightly.

“What’s the relevance here?” Brandon didn’t look impressed.

Deacon laughed. “If you don’t get it, there’s no reason to explain it.”

“This is totally Movie-ception.” And I was here for it. “I can be the Tony Stark to Bryan’s Peter Parker.”

Brandon raised an eyebrow. “*That* reference I get, and you are *not* Tony Stark.”

Ouch. “Why not?”

“You’re sexier.” Deacon to the rescue.

“Not as arrogant,” Bryan added. “Or old.”

Brandon clapped me on the arm. “Smarter.”

That made me feel better.

We left Deacon and Bryan to work and I took Brandon on a tour of the basement, and couldn’t help but beam when he told me it looked great. I didn’t put a lot of stock into most people’s opinions, but this was my big brother, no matter how old we got.

There was a teensy, tiny bit of me that wished he'd give me this kind of praise for my creative work, but I was a big boy, I could suck that up.

When we were done, I walked him outside.

"Hey, I've seen the videos on your channel. The new ones." His voice was casual as we paused inside the back doorway.

I swore I stopped breathing . "Yeah?"

"They look really good. You deserve the traffic you're getting, and more."

I couldn't help the smile that broke out across my face. "Thank you."

"I have something for you,"

"Is it in the car?" I liked presents.

"No." He reached in his pocket.

I couldn't help myself. "It's inappropriate for me to make a joke about pockets and presents, isn't it? Since you're my brother and all?"

"Don't know when that's ever stopped you." He pulled out two earbud cases and handed one to me. He always carried a second set, sterilized and paired to his phone. Some people were put off by it, but I was used to it. He was a composer and this was how he liked to share music.

I slipped the buds in my ears, curious, and Brandon did the same.

Brandon played me a thirty-second or so clip that was a catchy, fast tempo, rock tune.

“I like it,” I said. “Of course I do. Is it the intro to something?”

“Your channel. If you want it, that is. I can tweak it.”

He’d written custom music for me? “It’s awesome. It’s amazing. It’s perfect.”

Brandon chuckled. “I’ll send you the file. Give it a few more listens and make sure, then let me know.”

“Thank you. I mean it—thank you.” I was being a dork. I didn’t care.

The hinges on the back door creaked, and when Brooke walked in, I forgot everything else. Rude of me, but she was here, watching me with a shy smile, looking more stunning than I remembered. I didn’t care that it hadn’t even been a week, I couldn’t pull my gaze from her..

“I’m gonna go.” Brandon’s voice barely penetrated my thoughts.

“So soon?” My protest didn’t have any force behind it.

“I see that look on Danny all the time. I wear it a lot myself. You don’t want me here right now.”

I really didn’t. “Thank you.”

“For not being a cock block?”

Brooke flushed at Brandon’s question.

I laughed. “For everything.”

Brandon left, but I was still watching Brooke.

“Hey,” Brooke said softly. Her voice was lyrical. “Is this a good place to talk?”

Maybe later it would be. I didn't have the words for what I needed her to know. I cupped her face in my palms, and pressed my body and mouth to hers, pushing into her until her back hit the wall.

She gasped into the kiss, and I stole the chance to dart my tongue into her mouth and devour her sighs. She gripped my shirt in her fists and held me close. Not that I planned on going anywhere.

Brooke was a lifeline and I'd been drowning without her and had refused to admit it. I nipped at her lips and licked along her skin and held on for dear life.

"I don't care," I said breathlessly. "I don't care what it takes. I want you, I need you, and I'm never letting you go."

"I don't want you to."

Her lips were already swollen, and my nipping at them made them puffier and softer and if possible, more kissable. "Good." I dragged my thumbs along her cheekbones. "Because I love you. I'm desperately and completely and hopelessly in love with you and I'm not letting you go." *But...* I worked my jaw.

"But what?" Brooke asked, despite the fact I didn't speak the word aloud.

I wasn't sure I should say. This was so close to perfect, but I wanted it all, and I had to try. "Keep that in mind, how very much I love you."

"You're going to have to finish the thought eventually." Her tone was light.

I could call on the lack of her saying it back, but I wouldn't force that. "But I love Deacon too. I want you both. He doesn't know that. I wasn't sure I knew it until just now."

“Me too,” Brooke said. “That’s why I’m here.”

This time my kisses were more gentle. “That’s a cop-out. You have to actually say what you’re agreeing with.”

“I love you too. Even though it hasn’t been long, not talking to you destroyed me. I can’t imagine not having you in my life.” She leaned her weight into me. “But Deacon... I want him there too.”

I let out an exaggerated sigh. “I can only see one solution for our future.”

Brook looked worried. “What’s that?”

“We’re going to have to tell him he’s ours.”

She laughed lightly. “That sounds perfect.”

It really did. And I saw a whole lot more perfect in our future—all three of us could take on the world if we had to, and if we didn’t, we’d still have each other.

And there really was no better word for that than *perfect*.

deacon

WHILE ADAM AND BRANDON TALKED, I was doing some last-minute work with Bryan on the main showroom floor, moving some items forward that I felt needed more eyes on them.

The conversation about the twins' cribs stuck in my thoughts, attached to the past and refusing to budge.

"What did you do that made Mom push you out?" Bryan's question came out of nowhere.

I didn't want to have this conversation with him, or think about the answers myself. "Nothing." From one perspective, that was true.

"If it had to do with me, with last Sunday, I'm sorry. I didn't think that would be the big deal it became. I figured I'd tell Paige I was at a friend's, I'd go take some time to think, and I'd be back before anyone questioned it."

That was a messy day, and Brooke's reminder lingered with me that her family wasn't mine. But of course it wasn't—the realization slammed into me. I'd made sure it was never an option. "It wasn't your fault, it was mine."

"You said you didn't do anything." Bryan stared me down.

"I never gave her a chance to reject me." The words were meant more for me than him. "I made damn sure that wasn't

up to her.”

Bryan shifted his weight and jammed his hands in his pockets. “That’s messed up.”

“It really is.” I was making him uncomfortable. “Anyway, that’s that.” And it was up to me to fix that mistake. Because it was a massive mistake—pushing Brooke away. Adam. I didn’t know how I was going to make things right. “It was for my kids. The bedroom set.” Why did I say that?

Bryan looked surprised. “You have kids?”

“No.” I could keep this story simple. Free of emotion. “Years ago, just a little after you all moved to town, I was dating a girl who was pregnant. Twins.” I’d been so excited to have a family. “Turned out they weren’t mine, and she left me for their father.”

“Ouch.”

I had no idea where to go from here. I was spilling my secrets to a teenager. Why? I should tell him to get back to work and do the same. Maybe go see what Adam was up to.

“I barely remember my dad,” Bryan’s voice was quiet. “Some days I wonder if that makes me a bad person.”

“You weren’t very old when you lost him.”

“Old enough. Even though you didn’t get to raise those kids, you would’ve. You were there, ready and willing. That counts for a lot.”

I needed to change topics fast, but I couldn’t wrap my brain around a smooth transition. “You’re not a bad person. You’re doing so much for your family. It’s obvious you love them.” *Stop now.* This was the perfect place to wrap up this conversation.

“But I get it. I do.” Apparently I was still talking. “My dad walked out when I was five. Left me with his parents and never came back. I wondered for a long time if that was my fault, and the more time that passed, the more he faded from my mind, the more I blamed myself.”

And that, combined with the bad experience in my twenties, *losing* kids I’d looked forward to raising, made me pull away. At least I had the presence of mind to not share that revelation, but it knocked my mind off kilter regardless.

“You would’ve been a good dad,” Bryan said.

I didn’t know if he was just saying that, but it warmed me regardless. “You *are* a good son.”

“So, I’ll check back with you tomorrow morning. Grand opening and all that. I need my rest.” Bryan’s words tumbled out in a rush.

What the hell?

I was even more confused when he hurried out the door. So much for that touching moment.

“It’s not you, it’s us.” Adam’s voice from behind startled me.

I spun to see him standing in the doorway to the back room, his arm around Brooke.

“No one wants their mom to see them getting all sappy,” she said.

Right. They were talking about Bryan. I didn’t care, because my heart was cracking, seeing them together. I didn’t care if Adam said I wasn’t allowed to feel that way—I did. I hated seeing them together and not being a part of it, and it

had taken me a long time to own that feeling, but here it was. “How much did you hear?”

“The last couple of minutes.” Adam dropped his hand to capture Brooke’s, and tugged her to fall into step beside him as they strolled toward me.

“It’s a shame he ran out like that,” Brooke said. “He’s going to miss the good news.”

Something told me he didn’t want to hear me pouring my heart out to his mom. Telling both Brooke and Adam how I really felt and doing whatever it took to get them to give me a real chance. “My news first.”

Brooke shook her head. “Mine won’t take long, but you do need to hear it. I’m having the block declared a historic site.”

“What?” Adam’s surprise overlapped mine. “You didn’t think to mention that back there?”

Brooke blushed. “One, Deacon needed to hear it first, and two, my mouth was full.”

I didn’t know if I was too stunned about her news to be jealous. No, I did know. I was still furiously envious that Adam had already claimed her again. They seemed to be all better. “How?” I asked.

Brooke explained what Paige found, and my surprise grew until my eyes were probably as wide as saucers—I finally understood what that meant. “Travis signed the paperwork just a short while ago, halting the requirements the council had put on the block. No one has to make the changes, even though my application is still being processed.”

“That’s amazing. Holy shit.” I didn’t have enough words to convey how excited I was about the news, but Brooke looked

like she was holding something back. “What aren’t you telling us? How did you get Travis to back down?”

“I uh... I ran into him on my way to the city building. Making out with Manny in a back alley.”

My jaw dropped. “No shit.” Not as surprising as the rest of her news, but still not something I consciously thought I’d ever hear.

“I tried to tell him I wasn’t a gossip, but I know he yielded to get me to keep quiet about what I saw,” Brooke said.

I’d keep the information to myself as well, and the other news was so good. But my gaze kept drifting back to the way Adam and Brooke’s fingers were tangled together.

It was my fault that I wasn’t with her. That I’d never taken a chance to tell her I wanted more, because I never admitted it to myself, and now that she was with Adam... “I’m going to be that asshole,” I said.

Adam raised his brows. “Not new.”

“As opposed to the other asshole?” Brooke asked. “The secondary one most people don’t talk about?”

“Clever.” I was dryly amused.

“Almost always.” Adam squeezed Brooke’s hand.

The two of them were distracting in the best way, even now. “Let me get this out.”

“That’s what she said?” Brooke grinned.

I laughed. “I need to be serious for maybe sixty seconds, and then you can make jokes again.”

Adam looked like he was struggling to keep a straight face.

I sighed. “Get it out.”

“That’s sooo long.” He dragged out the words.

“That’s what she said.” Brooke’s grin grew.

This was already going to be difficult, but I needed to say it now, because I refused to lose them. I wouldn’t surrender the family I’d always wanted, and missed when it was right in front of me. “The two of you can’t be together without giving me a chance.”

Adam opened his mouth.

“With both of you.” I had to keep going, or I’d never get this out. “You have to give me a chance to be a part of what you have with each other. I was an idiot, not admitting to myself how I felt. Pushing Brooke away. Pretending I didn’t love Adam. I do. I love you Adam, and Brooke as well. I wish I could be more eloquent about it, but—”

Adam dropped Brooke’s hand and gripped the back of my neck, stealing my voice. He kissed me hard and drew out the moment until everything fell away except the three of us.

I pushed him back, needing to say just a little more, but I couldn’t find the words.

“We were all idiots.” Adam’s voice was gravel. “But I love you too, and I’m so fucking glad you figured it out. Though I wouldn’t have minded a little more hate sex first.”

“There was hate sex? And I missed it?” Brooke pouted.

“I’ll give you something much better.” I stepped away from Adam and wrapped an arm around Brooke’s waist. “I don’t know why it took me so long to own this, but I’ve been infatuated with you since the first day I saw you, and I don’t know when it became more, but the way I love you now is so intense it consumes me.”

“I love you too. So much it scares me. But I finally figured out you’re worth the risk. You both are. You’re going to let me keep Adam too. I assume.”

I glanced at Adam, and he beamed. “You know neither of you could really give me up.”

“It’s true.” And I was finally willing to own that fact.

Adam gripped the back of my neck with both hands, and I mimicked the gesture, our mouths clashing then molding together in a kiss that sealed me to him. How did I ignore what I felt for him for so long?

I didn’t want to let him go, but I wanted Brooke, too. I reluctantly broke away from Adam, and turned to Brooke. “I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” I said.

Brooke’s questioning look, from her lightly furrowed brow to the seductive slant of her lips, amplified my desire.

I glided my fingers lightly along her jaw, to her neck, and finally to grip her hair tightly in my fist. Her gasp sent desire spilling through me. I yanked hard, and captured her mouth, swallowing her moan.

How did I pretend for so long that my feelings for her, for Adam, were anything less than this intense need? I wanted to kiss Brooke from now until eternity. She was my lifeline and my breath and my universe.

I forced myself to break away, but I know I couldn’t keep my mouth off her for long. “I really want to take you in front of these giant windows.” My voice was ragged. “But we should probably not.”

“It’s going to happen eventually.” Adam had a good point.

Brooke's eyes grew wide. "Would you—we—really do that?"

"Fuck in front of the picture windows?" I liked the idea a *lot*. "If you're interested."

She nodded. "Not tonight, but yeah, I think I could be convinced."

It was going on the list.

"I'm going to need so many more lessons." Brooke sounded as excited as the words made me feel.

Adam wrinkled his nose. "Can we not call them that?"

"I like *list*." One was growing in my head with each suggestion and innuendo. "I've already got a good-sized one of things I'd like to do to you."

"Just me?" Brooke glanced sideways. "What about Adam?"

I shrugged, trying to look more casual than I felt. Truly, I wanted all the things from both of them. "I've already done a lot of them with Adam, so he can watch." Teasing slid into my reply.

Adam raised his brows. "I'm only content to watch sometimes."

"Like now?" Brooke's question lilted up.

She must've *really* liked the fucking-in-front-of-the-window idea.

"Let's start there," Adam said. "But only because I've had fantasies about watching Deacon ravage you for a long time."

He had? Fucking. Hot.

The three of us trekked upstairs, and I steered Brooke into my room.

Adam stepped back, and the way his heated gaze followed us would've had me hard if I wasn't already sporting a steel rod in my pants.

I was intently aware of our audience of one while I took my time stripping down Brooke. I pulled her shirt off first, covering her neck and shoulders in kisses. Then I removed her bra. There was no need to hurry, and I couldn't have even if there was a time limit. I wanted to savor her breasts and taste her nipples and suck until she was whimpering and fisting my shirt and squirming under my attention.

When I finally moved on, I slid her jeans and panties down her legs, stripped her shoes off, and the rest of her clothing. Standing, I claimed her mouth again and slipped my hand between her legs.

She was wet with anticipation. My fingers glided easily along her skin to part her folds. She bucked against my touch when brushed over her clit.

I dropped my head to her breast again, sucking while I circled her swollen button. The delicious sounds that tore from her chest spurred me on. I fingered and teased, and she squeezed her legs together and rocked against my touch.

When her body started to shake, I knew she was close. I pushed in harder, coaxing her into orgasm. Reveling in her screams of pleasure.

She pulled away with a soft laugh. "Too much."

"Do you want to stop?" I'd fuck Adam, but I'd rather have more of her as well.

Brooke shook her head. "No. I just need a breather."

“Good. Because I want to feel both of you at the same time,” I said.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

I held up my index finger. “Me.” I extended my middle finger so the two were together. “And Adam. Inside you.” I slipped my fingers inside her.

brooke

I UNDERSTOOD what Deacon was proposing, but I wasn't sure it was possible. Still, I was so turned on, and so hungry to feel both men at once, I was definitely going to give it a try. "All right."

At my agreement, Adam stepped forward to join us. I lost track of hands, but not kisses as they both crushed their mouths to mine and each other's. They stripped their clothes away between gropes and bites.

I loved watching them together as much as feeling them with me. Their passion was obvious—the same sparks that made me think for so long that they were already a couple. There was no denying how well they fit together, or how lucky I was to be a part of this. Of them.

When they stood naked next to me, shafts at attention and the hunger in their eyes making me feel like I was a delicious part of the meal, they rolled on condoms.

Deacon pressed his body to mine, and his erection dug into my stomach. I could melt into him like this, especially when Adam molded his chest to my back and nipped at my neck. He sneaked his head past mine to kiss Deacon, turning me into the yummy filling on their sandwich.

This entire experience was a whole new level of *wow*.

With his hands on my hips, Deacon slid back onto the bed and coaxed me to join him. “Straddle me,” he said as he laid back.

I tried to be sexy, climbing up his legs, but I was pretty sure I didn’t pull it off. “Is there a way to do this and not look awkward?”

“The first day I met you, I couldn’t stop thinking about how sexy you were. I’ve never been able to take my eyes off you.” Deacon’s warm assurance washed over me.

Heat flooded my cheeks. “I always thought you were teasing me. When you said, well, most anything about how I looked.”

Adam sighed. “I told you.”

“I know.” Deacon pursed his lips. “I was too much of a coward to just tell you how I felt. You’re so... you.”

I had no idea what that meant. “Is that good?”

Adam kissed along my shoulder. “That’s incredible.”

“*You’re* incredible.” Deacon slipped his palms up my thighs, toward the source of my need. He guided me onto him and slid inside me, stretching me out in the most delicious way. The groan he made was another delicious touch fluttering over me.

I still had no idea how this was supposed to work. Just Deacon was enough to make me wince—in a good way, but still.

A new touch slipped over my skin from behind, as Adam liberally applied lube, then coaxed his fingers into me.

“Relax.” Adam’s voice was low and comforting. It still made my pulse hammer against my ribs, knowing what he was going to try next.

He took his time teasing and stretching my opening with his fingers, and then when he slipped his shaft inside me. The sensation was almost too much, but it also felt incredible.

Both men rested there, cock to cock, cradling me between them. Adam slipped his hands forward to find my clit. To tease the button still swollen and sensitive from Deacon’s touch. Adam stroked until climax built under my skin. Until I was riding the edge of orgasm, but not falling over. I was clenching around them, my body not sure if the sensations were good or bad.

When pleasure rushed through me, it was like a dam had broken. I dug my fingers into Deacon’s arms, losing track of myself when I came. I pressed back into both of them.

This sensation was different, borderline uncomfortable, but so incredible.

Before the sensation faded, both men started rocking against each other. Deacon pulled me into him, and wrapped his lips around a nipple. Adam gripped my hips tightly. They both hit spots inside me I didn’t know existed.

Was this a series of orgasms, or one long, drawn-out one?

I didn’t care. It felt so good. So easy to lose myself in all of it, until the world ceased to exist.

Adam and Deacon were both making those incredible noises I associated with them finishing. Grunts and growls and drawn-out groans. Together they were a delicious chorus, and I wasn’t sure which of them finished first.

The frantic thrusting slowed to a stop. There was pain when Adam pulled out of me, but I'd do this again in a heartbeat. So worth it.

Deacon slipped out as well.

The mattress shifted and Adam wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me against him. His hot breath hit the back of my neck as he caught his breath.

Deacon cradled my face, and kissed my forehead, then my nose, and finally my lips. "Don't go home tonight."

"I won't." There was no way I could force myself from their arms.

For so long, I'd told myself the twins needed me to be their world. I never minded giving them everything I could, but after I lost my husband I assumed I had to do it alone. As my kids grew closer to *leave the nest* age, I'd assumed I would be alone.

But I didn't have to be. It was okay for me to love and live and pursue amazing opportunities, and I wasn't depriving them of anything.

And falling asleep in Adam's and Deacon's arms was okay. It was better than okay. It was amazing.

When I woke up, for a brief moment I was terrified that last night, the *I love yous* were a dream, but when I felt Adam and Deacon wrapped around me, I could breathe again. I had them. This was all real.

The day passed in a blur, as Deacon opened to more people than I'd ever seen in his shop, and kept busy all day. The rest of us didn't know the antiques the way he did, but we could take money, load furniture, and move things around as needed.

By the time he locked the front doors, almost two hours after the store was supposed to close, we were all exhausted. But it was in a good way.

We were discussing how to spend the rest of the night, and talking about sending Dylan and Bryan home, when Sebastian stopped by. Then Evie and Aubrey and a few other people who owned shops on the block.

“Is the rumor true?” Evie asked.

Deacon gave her a blank look. “Rumor?”

“That Brooke talked Travis out of that bullshit he was trying to force down our throats,” Sebastian said.

Adam grinned. “Oh yeah, that’s totally true.” He slid up behind me and the stool I was sitting on behind the counter, and rested his hands on my hips.

“I think this calls for a celebration.” Aubrey pulled a bottle of champagne from the large purse hanging from her shoulder.

I was impressed. “Do you carry that with you everywhere?”

“The purse? Yes. The champagne? No, but I had a feeling if anyone could pull something like this off, it would be Brooke.”

“Hey.” Deacon sounded hurt. “Why her and not me?”

Aubrey sighed and shrugged. “Because sometimes you’re kind of dumb.”

Deacon stuck his tongue out at her.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him back to stand closer to us. “Dumb, but really pretty.”

“That’s true,” Adam said.

Deacon huffed. “Not sure if I’m offended or not.”

Evie raised her brows. “You’re not sure if you’d rather be pretty or smart? Seriously?”

“Let’s eat, drink, and celebrate the amazing news and the business this is bringing in.” Sebastian grabbed the bottle from Aubrey.

The party moved into full swing. I fielded *thank yous* from most everyone as the night went on. Deacon or Adam or both of them were by my side most of the night, and it became apparent Aubrey was avoiding one of us.

She approached me when I found myself alone. “Thank you for making this possible,” she said.

“I had to. You all deserve it.” I’d been saying a variation on the same thing most of the night and I still meant it.

Aubrey shifted her weight to her other foot and started to turn away, but turned back to me again. “You’re lucky, you know.”

“In a lot of ways.”

“I mean to have Deacon. And I’m glad someone good is going to take care of him.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that besides *I know*, and that didn’t seem like the right answer. “Screw that. He’d better take care of me. I’m old.” I hid a wince at the self-depreciation.

“You’re not old,” Aubrey said.

A pair of hands slid around my waist and I knew without looking that Adam had appeared out of nowhere. “She’s right, you’re not.”

“Not what?” Deacon had joined us too.

Aubrey’s expression shifted toward blank, but she didn’t leave. “Not old.”

“Definitely not.” He grasped my fingertips.

We’d spent the night acting like the three of us were together, but it hadn’t hit me how little we’d done to hide it until Aubrey’s gaze dropped to my hand in Deacon’s. The three of us, Adam, Deacon, and I were official, and the more I thought about it, the more I loved it.

When more people were yawning than talking, we sent everyone home, shut off the lights, and agreed to clean up the pizza boxes and plastic cups around the trash can in the morning.

The three of us headed upstairs. I should go home at some point, but Bryan and Paige had promised they were okay alone for another night.

I was just glad they were talking again.

“What’s on your mind?” Adam asked softly.

So many things, I wasn’t sure I could put them all into words. But I was willing to try. “When I moved here years ago, it was to get away from everything that reminded me of my husband, and because I wanted the twins to grow up somewhere sane. In a close-knit community. Except, I didn’t find the kind of closeness I was looking for—not as it applied to me, anyway. I stuck it out for them, and there were so many days I wondered if I was doing the right thing.”

“They turned out pretty good, so I’d say *yes*.” Deacon’s voice was soft and kind.

“So did you,” Adam added.

Deacon shook his head. “I disagree.”

What? “You do?”

Deacon kissed the tip of my nose. “You turned out the perfect amount of bad.”

“Touché,” Adam said.

“And that’s good?” I was pretty sure it must be, but I had to be positive.

Adam took both our hands. “It’s perfect.”

He was right, it really was. I never could’ve imagined this life for myself, and now that I had it, I couldn’t imagine being happier. This was better than any fairytale. This was my perfect happy ending.

epilogue

Brooke

one year later

I SHOULD BE USED to this by now, but it was still a novelty to me to be sitting at my own kitchen table while Adam made breakfast. I was sipping my coffee, enjoying the morning, and he was wearing an apron the twins got me years ago that said *World's Best Mom*, while he dipped and flipped French toast on the electric griddle.

“Is everyone decent?” Paige’s call came from the next room.

Adam chuckled and shook his head.

“We’re clothed, I promise,” I replied.

Paige had been in Florida for the last few months, learning the basics of sport car repair from the NASCAR team she was working for. Starting in a week or so, she’d be going on tour with them, so they gave her a few days off.

She decided to surprise me with the news, and walked in on Deacon, Adam, and me making out in the living room.

Fortunately no clothes had come off completely yet, but she insisted she was scarred for life.

Paige walked in and took the seat next to me.

Adam set a plate of food in front of her.

“Nice apron.” Paige’s teasing was light and friendly.

“Thanks.” He grinned. “It’s all true. Nice shirt.”

Paige looked down at the graphic that said *Professional Fish Taco Eater* and returned his smirk. “Thanks.”

When Jamie’s parents found out she was dating Paige, they’d kicked her out. Jamie stayed with us for a while, but she and Paige had an apartment in Orlando now. Jamie was working at Walt Disney World and loving it.

I was grateful Paige didn’t care what people thought, that she was even willing to flaunt her opinion in shirt form, because people in town talked *a lot* about my relationship with Deacon and Adam.

The other shop owners on Main Street supported us, though. I’d gotten closer to most of Deacon’s neighbors, especially Aubrey now that she and Deacon were friends again.

Paige, Adam, and I were halfway through breakfast when the sound of the front door opening reached me, and Bryan called, “*hello.*”

“In here,” Paige yelled back.

I winced and mimed clearing out my ear.

Bryan rented a room from Sebastian. He’d moved out at the start of the college school year because he wanted to stay in town, but he didn’t want to admit his mom had sex. Those

were his words. *I don't care if you date two men, but I don't want to admit you have sex.*

“Food?” Paige held up her plate.

Bryan pulled up an empty seat. “Already ate. We ready to do this?”

“I’ll go wake up Deacon.” Adam finished his breakfast and stood.

Normally we let Deacon sleep in on Sundays, but today he and Adam were officially moving in. The three of us already spent almost every night together, and we were tired of not having a bed and a space that was all of ours.

They were moving in with me, since I had the most space.

“Could you do that without the orgasmic groaning?” Paige asked as Adam walked toward the stairs. “Some of us are still working on our first cup of coffee.”

Bryan snorted. “Speak for yourself. I’ve had plenty of coffee and I still don’t want to hear it. They made you listen to gross sex noises? Really? I call child abuse.”

“I can’t help it if Deacon is a bear,” Adam said.

Paige made a gagging motion. “In the morning.”

“You meant to add *in the morning* to the end of that sentence,” Bryan added.

Adam shrugged. “Did I? I don’t think I did. *Rawr.*”

I just laughed. The four of them, my men and my twins, got along so well. It was wonderful to see, even if I wasn’t quite comfortable with them vocalizing that specific topic.

Deacon was unusually bright-eyed when he and Adam joined us again.

When I mentioned it, Deacon gave me a quick kiss on the forehead. “Of course I am,” he said. “Today’s *the* day.” His hair had grown back over the past year, and he had it pulled into a high ponytail. I had to admit, I loved the look, especially with those sexy, tattooed forearms on display.

Perfect reason to be all smiles, as far as I was concerned.

We spent the next several hours making trips between Deacon’s shop and the house, transferring boxes and furniture.

Adam filmed a lot of it for his channel, which had exploded in popularity as he’d shifted to focus on weird and unique shops like Deacon’s, Aubrey’s, and Sebastian’s. Adam included a little bit about his life—our lives—too, but I wasn’t worried about him putting private information out in the world. He was cautious about how he shared.

He used his platform to promote little shops all over the country. A lot of them would send him video and he either compiled episodes from what they sent him, or flew out and spent a few days with them to get the footage he needed.

Deacon’s shop still got more coverage than everyone else. Partly because Adam was biased, but Deacon’s business had grown as well.

He did a lot of sales on a consignment basis, including making connections for other shops on the streets. He sold a lot of interesting antiques for people who didn’t want to get into reselling but had things they wanted to get rid of.

Both Adam and Deacon were loving what they were doing, and I loved seeing them so happy.

We finished moving everything in, and ordered pizza.

As the five of us sat around eating, laughing, and just enjoying the day, I absorbed all of it. Not because I was

worried it wouldn't last, but because I wanted to remember every bit of this amazing life going forward.

I wanted the twins to know this was their home still, even if they didn't live here anymore. They were welcome back any time, and their rooms would stay theirs.

We wrapped up, and it was time to take Paige to the airport. I didn't want her on such a late flight, but she insisted it was the best way to make sure she got to spend time with us and still make work in the morning.

"Before you go, I almost forgot." Deacon held up a finger, then jogged upstairs.

Paige and Bryan gave me a questioning look, and I shrugged. Whatever he was up to, it ought to be interesting.

Deacon was back a moment later, with a brown paper wrapped square. "For your apartment." He handed the picture to Paige.

"Ooh, present." She ripped into the wrapping without hesitation, her brother cringing the entire time. I assumed because she wasn't cutting everything away carefully.

Paige's jaw dropped when she saw what was inside, and I couldn't help my smile. It was a picture frame with two photos of her tank—the original image of the original owner, and a second one with her, Bryan, and Adam standing in front of the vehicle.

"I love it. Thank you." Paige threw her arms around Deacon's neck. She hugged Adam as well. "Because you took the picture."

I hated to tear her away from them, or send her on her way, but she had a flight to catch.

I took Paige to the airport and Bryan rode along. When we dropped her off at the curb, we exchanged a billion hugs and almost as many sniffles and tears. Even Bryan was swiping at his cheeks.

After we watched Paige walk into the airport, I took Bryan back to his apartment. I was so proud of my kids—all grown up and following their dreams.

I dropped him off as well and headed home. The home I'd bought so many years ago just needing a place for myself and my babies where I could hide from the world. The house I'd mourned in. Watched my children grow up in. And now the house I was starting the next chapter of my life in.

Adam and Deacon were there, waiting with kisses and love.

Everything that had happened in this home had made me, my children, the people we were now.

And I couldn't wait to see what came next, with my amazing guys and wonderful life.

THANK you for falling in love with Brooke, Deacon, and Adam.

For more sexy, geeky threesomes, and to meet Adam's brother, Brandon, check out [DUAL WIELDING](#). Reese surrendered her love with Danny when she walked away years ago. She has his friendship again, but his heart belongs to Brandon. When a late night dare between Reese and Brandon leads to a scorching kiss, their worlds will never be the same.

- [Click here to check out DUAL WELDING today!](#)

the layover

Three Player Grind Book 3

For my eternal dragon

I

early

A LOT of people thought my life was glamorous—jetting around the world all the time. Different country every month. Different rooms. Different scenery. Different guy's bed... With no partner or kids for me to answer to, and an empty apartment in between trips.

Anyone who thought that was right—I loved my life.

It was why I was sitting in the airport at eight-thirty on Monday morning, listening to the bedlam while I scanned the headlines on my phone.

Most of the people waiting with me were doing the same, except for the two men sitting a few rows away.

My gaze drifted to them every few seconds, not because they were sharing a phone and speaking Italian to the person on the other end of the line, but because they were h-a-w-t, and that spelled *hello, sexy baby*.

Baby because they were probably a decade younger than me, and it was easier to think of them as being barely adults than remember I was turning forty-one in just a few weeks.

They both had dark, almost black hair, and eyes in a similar color. The kind of gazes that were probably deceptive

reflecting pools up close. And they both wore simple platinum bands on their left ring fingers.

One was dressed like he was straight out of a fashion shoot—burgundy button-down shirt, dark trousers, and a suede vest, buttoned and showing off a trim and slender figure.

The other wore jeans. His button-down was a similar color beige to the walls, but the sleeves were rolled up halfway to the elbow, leaving his thick forearms and large, rough hands on display, and highlighting the bulge of his biceps.

I bet they were pretty when they fucked.

I knew just enough Italian to pick out a handful of words. Combined with the snippets I heard coming from the phone they shared, it sounded like they were talking to a young girl. There was a lot of laughing and cooing and praise.

The entire exchange made me smile, and not just because the men were easy to look at. I may be childless by choice, but I loved seeing happy, loving families. The world needed more of those.

I turned my attention back to my own phone, and the news. Specifically, finance and industry. It could be some dry as toast shit, but I worked for an angel investor firm and had regular dealings with clients, so it helped to speak their language and have an idea of what was looming on the horizon for me.

One of the big companies was up, one was down, one had pissed off a subset of their users, another had a data breach.

I filed away the stories that would be global news when I reached my destination in Milan, and moved on. What books were new and hot this week? That was my kind of news. Especially those books that most people would turn their noses

up at as being *smutty* or *fantasy fulfillment for women*. Like either of those were a bad thing?

Wait, what was that?

I flipped back to the screen I'd just left and scanned the page, looking for what had caught my eye. No. *Fucker*. I wanted to shout it out loud, but I settled for screaming in my head.

Renowned Architect Curtis Webb to Make the Old New Again

The article went on to describe how *the creative and talented Dr. Webb* was breathing new life into a structure in Milan, and turning it into a modern-day eatery.

Dr. Webb only had his PhD because I'd written the bulk of his dissertation. That was young and stupid me—in my late twenties, convinced that I was unlovable because I wasn't married yet, and happy to give my affections to any man who smiled at me and made sure I had an orgasm the first time we had sex.

Fuck, Curtis had been an incredible lay in the early days. But a whirlwind romance, a Vegas wedding, and about six months of marriage had turned him into a basement dwelling troll who kept me around to do his laundry and his schoolwork.

I stuck it out longer than I should've, thinking that I must be the problem, and when I finally sucked it up and left him, he drove that point home.

Since then I'd learned that book boyfriends were the only good boyfriends.

It sucked that our paths occasionally ran near each other. I was an appraiser and property evaluator, so running into

renowned architects came with the territory. But for the most part, I didn't have to talk to him, see him, or even think about Dr. Curtis Webb.

Looked like I couldn't avoid that this time. The property he was working on in Milan was within a few blocks of the one I was on my way to spend several weeks with. One of our newest investment clients was restoring a church right down the street from Curtis's project, and I was heading there to be on site while things kicked off.

It wasn't just the vicinity of his project to mine that rubbed me wrong, it was the language in the article. Because our clients were doing something with an almost identical marketing campaign behind it—preserving the old while blending it with the new.

My phone buzzed with a new text message.

You reading the news? It was from my best friend and work partner in crime, Daria.

Are there countries where castrating your ex is a legal means of recourse? I replied.

She had an asinine ex-husband too, so she'd get it. *God, I wish. Ooh, what about... Nope. Never mind. Still illegal.*

Don't let that stop you from suggesting it. I hear there are no bad ideas, I wrote.

This is a great idea. Still illegal, though.

My laugh died in my throat when my phone rang, interrupting the conversation and souring the coffee in my gut when the name *Dickhead McGee* appeared on my screen. I'd be amused that either one of Daria's children or boyfriends changed the name, if I wasn't annoyed to see Curtis calling.

I clicked *Answer*. “You’ve reached the desk of Carly Hammond. She refuses to talk to your arrogant ass right now, so— “

“Hey, Temptress.” Curtis’s smooth tone and use of a nickname I’d learned to loathe made me grit my teeth. I could picture him sitting in some overpriced mesh draft chair, leaning back in one of those tacky Hawaiian print shirts he liked so much, with a smug look on his face. “Long time no talk,” he said.

“For good reason.”

Curtis made a clucking noise. “I hear we’re going to be working neighbors. I wanted to call before you got here, and see if we need to make any sort of *who can be onsite when* arrangements. To keep things from getting awkward.”

Wait. What? “How did you know I was going to be there?”

“Raphael Investment Group project plus restoration equals the adorable little Carly,” he said.

Castration was too good for him. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.” If this was a romance novel, I’d tell him next that he could meet my new boyfriend while I was there. It wasn’t, and I refused to let myself care what Curtis thought. “I’ll be busy working, so I’m more likely to run into whatever sucker you have doing your work this month, than I am you.”

“Hmm. I’ll see you in Milan, Temptress.” His tone was cool, no hint of reaction whatsoever, and he hung up first.

Which made me more furious. I exercised far more restraint than I should need to, to keep myself from calling him back just so I could be the one to hang up on him.

Fuck it. I refused to let anything, even him, ruin the fact that I was spending the next few weeks in my favorite city.

Milan was gorgeous in the summer. And the fall. In winter. Spring...

He wasn't going to spoil this trip for me.

I kept the thought on repeat in my mind as the airline called for First Class to board. I made so many trips that it was nothing to upgrade my flight, and I fell in with the handful of other passengers in the same section.

As I stowed my bag and settled into my seat, Mr. Jeans with the sexy forearms took the seat next to me, and Mr. Suede Vest, who I assumed was his partner, sat across the aisle from us.

The view ought to make for a nicer flight, and helped push Curtis further from my mind. "Do you two want to sit together?" I asked. "We could swap seats?"

"No, thank you." Mr. Jeans's accent sent pleasant shivers racing down my spine. "He likes to watch."

Was that a *lost in translation* kind of reply? I hoped not, because the way he winked when he said it made me want to clench my thighs together. "Lucky for me, I like the attention."

Mr. Jeans smirked. "I'll keep that in mind."

They were even hotter in person. Go figure.

They were also mostly quiet as everyone finished boarding, and we left the gate. I could respect that. Appreciate it even. Friendly was one thing, but non-stop chatting from Salt Lake to New York, even if it was mostly flirting, wasn't for me.

I could turn my attention to my current read. As I pulled the book up on my phone, a few choice words stood out.

He lingered on her breasts, pinching and twisting her nipples, while his partner gave her pussy extra attention.

I'd forgotten I left off on one of the spicy scenes. As long as no one read over my shoulder, I'd be fine.

Easy to say, but as I read about the heroine being worked over by two adoring gods, insistent need throbbed between my legs, and my pulse quickened.

I really shouldn't read this in a place where I couldn't masturbate, but there was no way I was stopping now. It was so easy to imagine myself in her place.

"I don't think teeth work that way." Mr. Jeans's sexy-as-fuck accent wove its way into my reading.

Heat flooded my skin as I looked up to find him looking between me and my phone screen. I raised my brows, rather than letting him see how turned on I was. "Oh really? You're an expert in wolf shifter fangs?" I kept my challenge teasing.

2

raul (tony)

IT WAS impossible for me to ignore the stunning woman with the blond streaks in her long hair. That the hint of pink in her cheeks changed based on her scowl or her smile. That she hadn't hidden the way she was watching Diego and me.

When I'd pointed her out to him, we agreed that if we were back in Milan, we'd take a few hours, or an entire night, to get to know her better.

Discovering I was seated next to her on the plane was an incredible surprise, and catching a glimpse of what she was reading sent the blood rushing straight to my dick. Should I leave her alone to enjoy her book? Probably. But I had to know what the odds were of watching Diego bury his face between her legs by the end of the flight, and then me fucking her until she screamed after.

Now that I'd struck up the conversation with her, she was watching me with expectation. "We have them in Italy, you know," I said. "Men who become wolves." Not my best line, but it wasn't bad.

"Do you." Her flat tone, the fact she hadn't phrased it as a question, was its own kind of scream—one of disbelief.

“Seductive men who fill the room with their presence, and take what they want in a way that’s so sexy their prey can’t resist? And who growl and bite during sex? We do.” Just a short list of the reasons I’d married Diego.

Her laugh brightened her entire face, and her eye roll was the perfect accent.

“I’m Tony.” I wasn’t. I was Raul. But Antonio was my middle name, a family name, and when I was in The States, I was in the habit of going by Tony because it made life easier for everyone. “He’s Nick.” I jerked my head back at Diego.

“Lee.” Her smile was guarded, but it still shone in her eyes.

“I admit to reading over your shoulder,” I said. “When the word *cock* caught my eye, I had to see the context.”

The natural pink in her cheeks, the color she’d tried to hide under powder, darkened. “If I admit to having done the same on more than one occasion, with someone else’s book, will you think less of me?”

“Exactly the opposite.” I watched her as we talked, each little movement, trying to gauge if she was interested or just being polite. Diego and I had an open relationship, built on honesty. The two of us had been committed to an amazing woman when we were younger, the mother of our daughter, but she’d decided *Mom Life* wasn’t for her, and moved to the US. It turned out she’d been more infatuated with the idea of fucking two men than she was with raising a family with us.

Diego and I would love to have a relationship like that again, to bring a woman into our life longer term, but we realized the odds of that were unlikely. It didn’t stop us from sharing our bed with people who grabbed our attention.

“I don’t know how you can argue that it’s not possible. The biting.” Lee seemed to still be focused on my opening comment. “You’re talking about a man who magically turns into a wolf. All bets are off.”

Was that a challenge? I was torn between proving her wrong, and flirting. Doing both seemed unlikely with a woman who was willing to argue werewolf anatomy, but trying ought to be a blast. “It’s not a matter of magical transformation, it’s about anatomy. The human mouth isn’t shaped that way. Would you like a demonstration?”

She snorted—even that was attractive on her. “Did you just offer to bite me?”

“It sounds rude when you put it that way.” Though Italian was my first language, I’d grown up around English speakers—both American and British—thanks to my family’s company. I was familiar with a lot of the slang and idioms, but I wasn’t above using my accent to sound like I didn’t quite understand what I was saying.

I knew what was coming out of my mouth.

Lee’s disbelief hadn’t faded. “*I sound rude?* you just asked if I wanted a demonstration of how teeth work.”

“That’s only rude if you’re not interested.” This was fun, and if it didn’t get me slapped it’d be worth it. Hell, even if it did get me slapped...

“Arrogant much?” Lee asked. “Or is it only arrogance if it’s not true?”

I liked her. “No, I’m quite arrogant. But I have earned it.”

Lee leaned in closer, despite her doubtful expression. The proximity sent the faintest hint of vanilla drifting toward me.

If I ran my tongue up the side of her neck, along that creamy skin, would she taste like panna cotta?

“Your demonstration wouldn’t be valid, even if I agreed to it,” Lee said.

“Why not?”

“Their jaws shift.” She nodded at her phone. “To be a wolf snout. Your jaw is far too square to have the same effect.”

I was glad she noticed. “It’s not a matter of the shape—the front teeth don’t cut skin the way a knife would.” Was I really arguing the anatomy of a werewolf bite? This was fun.

“Their entire bone structure changes, and you think their teeth stay the same?”

I couldn’t win this disagreement, which meant I needed to change the rules. “I can’t say I’ve thought much about it. You on the other hand seem to have put a lot of thought into it.” Not that I was shaming her—it was both interesting and sexy.

“My wolf shifter stories keep me warm at night.” She paused, furrowed her brow, and blushed.

Was that a confession? “Is *warm* a euphemism?”

“For giving myself orgasms. yes.”

So much for innuendo. I was surprised at the response but not disappointed. “That’s something I’d like to see.”

“It’s not something I tend to do for an audience, hence the *giving myself...*” She ducked her head as she trailed off, but the gesture didn’t hide the pink growing up her neck.

I was so in. “But you want to. For me.”

Her head shot up and so did her eyebrows. “Do I?” Her voice was flat again. “Because you’re so charming and

handsome?”

“I am, but that’s not why. Because you’re turned on, I have a sexy accent, and this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to check something naughty off your bucket list.”

“Once-in-a-lifetime chance.” She searched my face.

She was about to tell me *yes*. Would she let me lick her fingers when she was done?

“Move, please.” Lee stood.

Oops. Called that wrong.

diego (nick)

I HEARD most of the conversation between Raul—*Tony*—and Lee. He was such an asshole sometimes, but he was my asshole. I was happy to admit to being the sucker who loved him.

“Move, please.”

I wasn't surprised when Lee stood and made the *request*.

Raul, on the other hand, looked like she'd just spit in his drink. “Excuse me?” His question was a request to repeat what she'd said.

Lee huffed. “I'm swapping seats with your friend, partner, whatever. Please move.”

I tried to hide my chuckle—I liked her. She was attractive, intelligent, and held her own with Raul. Triple threat, right there. I grabbed my carry-on, and stepped into the aisle, so she could have my seat.

“I'm sorry about him,” I said as she brushed past me.

She gave me a glance. “Don't.” She didn't sound annoyed, but there was no playfulness in her voice either.

“Why not?” I asked.

“He’s obviously not sorry, and he doesn’t need you cleaning up his messes.” Lee settled into my now-empty seat.

I’d done plenty of cleaning up his messes, and never complained. For instance, if we’d hooked up with her, I could imagine licking along her pussy, cleaning Raul’s cum from her hot, wet skin. Not that I’d share that fantasy with her, but the images were enough to make me hard.

I gave her a short bow. “Regardless, enjoy the rest of your flight.” I took the seat next to Raul. “You’re an idiot,” I said teasingly, and loud enough for Lee to hear.

“Did you see her? Worth the risk, my love.”

Looking past him, I focused on Lee. She already had her head down and was staring at her phone, but she wasn’t moving. “I did see her.” And assumed she was still listening to us. “She’s stunning from head to toe, but the way she turned you down.” I mimed a mid-air kiss. “Hottest thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

Raul raised an eyebrow.

A corner of Lee’s mouth tugged up, but she didn’t look up.

With Raul’s Adventures in Flirting having come to an end, we tucked into work for the rest of the flight. There were almost four more hours until we landed at JFK International, and Raul and I had things to finalize before we got home.

We were building a tasty empire, and one restaurant was the first step. Thanks to Raul’s family connections, we’d managed to secure an abandoned church to use as our building, and the people his cousin knew in finance had helped us secure some funding.

Remodeling would be my focus when we got home—I’d be working closely with the representative our investors were

sending to oversee things—and Raul was refining the menu. We worked in our own worlds on the flight, only pausing occasionally to nudge each other for an opinion.

This was only my third time in the US, and only my second flying across the continent. It still amazed me how *big* things were. My gaze kept drifting to the window, to watch the landscape scroll by and change so far beneath us. The attendant said we were flying at forty thousand feet. I either dropped or added a zero trying to convert that to kilometers. Twelve? One hundred twenty?

We were high up, and it was gorgeous.

When the light went darker outside my window, it drew my attention once again. We'd flown into a cloud bank.

A flash of light outside made me wince, and a crack of thunder threatened my hearing.

The plane dropped, taking my stomach with it, and leaving my laptop in the air for a heartbeat. As the computer crashed back to my tray table, several people screamed.

The flight switched from smooth to riding over a back country road with no shocks in an instant. I clutched my laptop and waited for the bumpiness to pass. I wasn't a flying novice, but I was in the dozen-or-so-trips-in-my-lifetime category, rather than the all-the-time category, so this kind of disturbance was new for me.

Raul wrapped his hand around mine and gave me a comforting squeeze. "*Passerà,*" he muttered kindly.

Roughly, *this too shall pass.* "*Certo.*" I offered him a smile.

The flight attendant came over the speaker to tell us we'd encountered some turbulence, and asked everyone to return to

their seats, buckle their seatbelts, and put their tray tables up.

With the plane bouncing and bucking, occasionally dropping a foot or two before recovering, the crew stumbled their way down the aisle to collect whatever drinks hadn't already covered the passengers.

Out the window still looked stunning, but in a more menacing way, as the lights on the wings reflected off clouds and icy drops pelted the body of the plane.

This would even out soon. We'd fly through the storm. We'd be fine. I wasn't terrified, but I was a bit anxious.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We've encountered the edge of hurricane Isabella. Airports between here and the coast are closing in anticipation, so we'll be landing in Philadelphia. People at the gate can answer any of your questions, our attendants cannot. They don't know any more than you do."

The plane erupted in shouts again, this time of protest, as a dozen bells chimed at once for the crew's attention.

This was bedlam.

The plane lurched again, and the sound grew louder until it was a deafening blend of terrified screams and angry yelling.

This was utterly ludicrous. Why were people so poorly behaved? The frazzled staff was trying to collect garbage and answer questions and calm people, all while they bounced around the cabin with each lurch of the plane.

An attendant stood a few feet from us, trying to talk over the PA, but her voice didn't carry over the rest of the noise.

This was ridiculous.

I nudged Raul's legs out of the way. He gave me a questioning look as I moved past him, and I held up a finger to indicate he'd see soon enough.

When I stepped up next to Announcement Attendant, she stared back with wide eyes.

I tended to look imposing when I needed to, and she was already under a lot of stress.

"Sir, I need you to—"

"May I?" I nodded at the microphone receiver in her hand.

She looked between it and me as if she didn't quite understand. "I don't..."

"Please." My voice was firm.

She nodded and handed me the device.

I pressed the *Send* button, and whistled sharply. The high-pitched sound split the air, and the bulk of people shut their mouths in favor of looking around for the source. Now most of the plane was looking at me.

Not my favorite thing, but I knew exactly what they saw—a large, casually dressed man who looked like I had zero fucks to give. I was imposing, and when I spoke, many of them would hear the accent and draw conclusions.

"The captain has kept you apprised of the situation." I let a hint of menace slide into my voice. "The crew needs to do their jobs, and can't answer your questions. When we land, you will be taken care of." I was only repeating what had already been said, but if even a fraction of people drew their own conclusions about what the large Italian man meant by *taken care of*, things would be quieter.

The noise started again, but not nearly as much of it. I handed the woman the receiver, gave her a brief nod, and returned to my seat.

A glance at Lee as I passed showed she was watching me with amusement. She didn't try to hide her smirk when I met her gaze.

I slid in next to Raul again, and he squeezed my knee. "You're sexy when you go all gruff-mafioso," he teased.

"I know."

After some circling and frequent updates from the crew, we landed and disembarked. The pack in front of every desk in the airport was dense, as people clambered to figure out what they were supposed to do next.

"If we pick a line, we'll be here all night," I said. But if we didn't, who knew how long we'd be stuck here? We could afford to lose a day, though I hated to take so long to get back to our daughter, but much longer and we'd cut into our work schedule.

Raul nodded. "I'll make some calls." He pulled his phone from his pocket, but paused without dialing, his gaze falling on something behind me.

I turned to see Lee approaching, a faint smile on her full lips. How often did she wear a look like that? The kind of expression that said she knew and saw more than she was letting on.

"Nick, right?" She stopped next to us.

I stopped myself from looking around, to figure out who she was talking to. Nick—short for Dominic, my middle name. I hated when Raul did that. "That's me."

“In case no one else said so, or even if they did, nicely done on the plane.” She sounded sincere.

I didn’t care if anyone besides Raul had an opinion about the things I did, but hearing Lee’s words warmed me. “Thank you. I hate seeing a situation deteriorate that way.”

She chewed her bottom lip, biting the plump flesh into a swell I wanted to nip at, and took a step back. “Anyway, I’ll let the two of you be.” Despite the words, she didn’t turn away.

Was her demeanor different from on the plane? If so, it was subtle. I could be reading too much into the situation.

“Wait,” Raul said, despite the fact that she hadn’t left. “We got off on the wrong foot earlier.”

“Because I turned you down?” There was the Lee from First Class.

Raul chuckled. “Because you didn’t want to.”

No. Really. I’d married an asshole. “She gets it, *principe*. You’re pushy.”

Lee’s smile grew as she ducked her head. When she looked up again, her mostly blank expression had returned. She focused on me. “Do you not have a problem with him hitting on me?”

“I have a problem with it if you do.” I shrugged. “Otherwise, no. We’re very European in our relationship.”

She furrowed her brow. “I don’t know what that means.”

“I was hoping you did, because I don’t, but we hear it from a lot of Americans,” I teased.

“Essentially, anything goes as long as everybody agrees.” Raul put it much more directly and clearly than I had.

Lee’s not-quite smile was back. “Listen, I don’t know if the two of you have made arrangements for the night, but I have a hotel room already, if you’re interested.”

I didn’t have to look at Raul to know that he was as shocked as I was by the offer, though he was probably hiding it better.

“Not-like-that.” Lee’s words tumbled out quickly. “I just... Forget it. I’m an idiot. I hope making arrangements for the layover goes okay for you.” She spun away from us.

early (lee)

WHAT WAS I DOING? Inviting two strangers to share my room? Because I was a grown-ass woman who was terrified of being left with nothing to keep me company but my thoughts during a heavy storm, and the pretty men with the prettier accents could distract me?

I'd be in a hotel, surrounded by hundreds of people. It wasn't the same and I was wavering on re-extending my offer.

"You didn't give us a chance to answer." Nick's reply was enough to tip me toward facing them again, rather than scurrying away like a timid little mouse. "We don't know the city. I don't suspect finding a room, in this weather, this time of night, will be easy. We'd love to share yours. I even promise my husband will keep his hands to himself."

"Unless you beg me to touch you," Tony added.

I rolled my eyes, but I liked the shameless flirting, and the relief that spread through me was instantaneous. Not complete, but better than the panic that had started to creep in before they accepted. Any other time, any other conditions, I'd be fine, but this weather...

"If you can wait a few moments, we do still need to make some calls," Nick said.

I gave him my best cool-but-sweet smile. “I’ll be here all night.”

They both chuckled, and stepped away. I found an unoccupied slice of airport near a pillar, where they should still be able to see me, and let the crowds mill around me the way the wind outside was doing to the building.

When the lights flickered around me and several people gasped and murmured, I hugged myself. It had been fifteen years and I shouldn’t care, but the really bad storms, the ones that brought the world screaming to a halt, made my gut churn.

“Shall we?” Tony’s voice startled me and kept me in the airport rather than letting me drift into the past.

I nodded. We joined the throngs of grumbling passengers headed in the direction the signs told us to, to catch a taxi to my hotel.

“Is your final stop Milan?” Tony asked.

I was fine spending the night with two strangers, but not telling them who I actually was. Still, if they were on the same flight as me after this, they’d know the truth. “Yes. I’m hoping to land me one of those sexy wolf shifter mates. I hear there’s a surplus there.”

Nick’s laugh was a deep, rumbling sound that slid through me with tantalizing promise. “A surplus doesn’t always mean a better selection.”

“No, it doesn’t.” I liked him.

“So all pleasure, no business?” Tony asked.

“Finding a wolf mate is serious business.” I couldn’t hold a straight face long enough to finish the sentence. “But yes, always pleasure. Milan is one of my favorite places to visit.”

Fortunately, because the partners at the investment firm I worked for had some serious contacts there, I got to spend a lot of time there.

“What do you like best about it?” Nick sounded genuinely interested.

Would I fuck them tonight? I had no idea. I had plenty of fantasies about being with two guys, especially after seeing how it worked out for some of the other people in my life, but in reality I couldn’t even stand having one man around long-term, and Tony had such a massive ego.

In my experience, that didn’t always equate to other massive attributes. Empathy. Personality. Dick.

“I love the food,” I said. “The people. And oh *God* the history and architecture. I could lose myself in exploring the back streets for hours, and still not discover it all.”

Tony’s smile shifted to more genuine, less *this is my sexy, lady-killer smirk*. “You and Nick both. I bet he could show you some great new sights.”

“I don’t know. It sounds like Lee could teach me a few things about the city.” Nick studied me intently enough I both felt it and wondered how he kept walking without running into anything.

“I’m still just a tourist,” I said. “Every time I’m there I discover something I never knew existed.”

Nick stepped ahead a foot or two, and the crowds naturally parted for him, making walking easier. “I do too. Still. And I grew up there.”

“I’ll have to get a list from you before we get on the plane tomorrow.” I wanted to say *you’ll have to show me around*, but I didn’t want to set any expectations. There was still part

of my mind intently aware of how risky it was to offer my room to two men the way I had.

Though, the longer I talked to them the less threatening they were. Rather, the less I thought tonight was a mistake. The creepy guys, the *nice* guys, tended to have red flags that became more apparent with time, and Nick and Tony weren't raising any of those.

We made it out to the curb and caught a minivan cab, letting us all sit in back with each other. They both sat across from me, and we made more small talk on the trip to the hotel. I didn't know anything more about their actual lives than they did about mine when we arrived at our destination, but I had a good idea of who they were as people.

Nick tended toward more serious, though his sense of humor was obvious, and Tony was the flirt. But it was also clear they absolutely adored each other, which was sweet.

As we walked into the hotel, cream and gold and elegance spread out in front of us. Normally the company wouldn't spring for four-star lodgings, but this was an emergency and Kandace, the partner overseeing this investment, took pity on me and approved a large reimbursement while I was here.

The gift shop caught Tony's attention, despite it being closed, and he dragged Nick toward the window, saying something about *souvenirs for Eloise*. I let them look, grateful for the chance to check in without them hearing my full name. Telling them I was *Lee* wasn't total falsehood. It was what my sister called me when we were little, and she still used the name sometimes when she teased me.

I gave the desk clerk my information and she tapped away. "Oh, three guests," I added.

She frowned, but the expression vanished so quickly I might have imagined it. “And I have you in the honeymoon suite?”

Did she? I let out a laugh-sigh. “Very possibly.” I’d told the woman who handled our reservations to put me in any room she could find. “But I don’t need any of the special amenities.”

“It’s included in the cost.”

“Treat yourself when your shift is over?” I was serious. A massive suite for the night would be fun, but I didn’t need rose petals on the bed or champagne and strawberries— On second thought, those last two might be nice.

She handed me the room keys. “Most of it is already up there. Enjoy your stay and please call if you need *anything*.”

I found Nick and Tony where I’d left them, and from what little I understood, it sounded like they were playfully arguing over how big a teddy bear they should get, and what color.

“What do you think?” Tony asked me. “Pink or purple?”

I stared at him, wide-eyed and searching my brain for an answer. What little I knew about modern little girls was relegated to Daria’s six-year-old, who loved pink. Then again, her thirteen-year-old would live in navy blue, given the chance. “Red.” Which was really just darkish pink, so it was a happy medium?

I’d draw on my own experiences, but I spent most of my childhood stealing my brother’s GI Joes, because they had better gear for going on archeological digs, while my sister made them ponchos to keep off the sun and hide the ugly camouflage. “Or anything but army green,” I added.

One corner of Nick’s mouth tugged up. “Noted.”

Tony shook his head and sighed. “We’ll decide in the morning.”

“By *we’ll decide* he means whichever one of us gets down here first wins,” Nick said.

“I can’t wait to see the results. Shall we?” I jerked a thumb toward the elevator, and tried to ignore the anticipation of spending a night with these two mysterious and sexy men.

The suite was opulent. That was the best word I could think of for it. More like a small apartment than a large hotel room, with a living room, kitchenette, and bedroom. Flowers sat on the table, along with a gift basket, a *congratulations* card, and an ice bucket holding a bottle of champagne.

A sharp whistle of admiration came from Tony, who stopped next to me. “I didn’t know you felt this way.” His tone was instantly the same seductive he’d used on the plane. “*Gattina*, why didn’t you say something?” He wrapped an arm around my waist, startling me.

I squealed in spite of myself when he dipped me and hovered his face near mine. “As long as you’re willing to share my heart, yes, *yes*, I accept your proposal. We can have forever.” Tony finished with a melodramatic flair to his voice, and his mouth was so close to mine, he could kiss me.

A low rumble filled the room, and the clap of thunder made me jump in his arms. The only issue I had with this room was it kept us so high up that the wind was easy to hear howling outside. I’d be staying far from the windows tonight.

“You’re going to scare the poor woman.” Nick offered me his hand, and tugged me from Tony’s arms. “Unless you liked it.” He looked at me.

Thank God for the distraction. “I’m not marrying anyone. It’s nothing personal, I’m just not the marrying type.” I didn’t have a problem speaking my mind when needed, but bluntness wasn’t always called for. Diplomacy seemed like the best bet in this situation—offering nothing, and keeping most options on the table.

“That’s fair.” Tony didn’t look offended the way he had on the plane. The fact that he was over being told *no* was a pleasant surprise.

I moved to the basket on the table. “I see no reason to let this go to waste, though. I bet we don’t even have to be married to use any of this.” As I talked, I pulled the ribbon away.

Nick stuffed it into his pocket.

Odd, but okay. The cellophane wrapping was obnoxiously loud and huge, but we wrestled into a trash can with a few huffs and a lot of giggles.

“Chocolate strawberries.” I held the box up like I was a proper Vanna White. It was tempting to claim them all as mine, but that might be rude. Then again, it was *my* room.

“Which you look like you might sell either or both of us out for,” Nick teased.

I ducked my head. “Not that I’d admit, but maybe.”

Tony took the box from me, popped it open, and extracted a single, decadent looking piece of fruit. “In that case, I’ll feed you strawberries until your heart’s content.”

He didn’t seem to have an off button after all. I’d mind more if each try wasn’t both flattering and a bit of a turn-on. When he held out the strawberry, I let him press it to my lips,

which I parted in a soft sigh. I teased my tongue along the tip, making sure I had the room's attention before biting hard.

"Ouch." Tony cringed.

Chocolate crumbled and juice dribbled down my chin. This was far more hilarious than sexy, and I snickered through the bite of strawberry.

Nick drew a finger up my chin, and I almost choked instead when he wiped away the juice and licked his finger clean. "If you two are done..." he said.

Tony shook his head. "Never."

"For now." This was fun.

"Serious for a moment," Tony held up his hands. "This is an expensive room. Let us pay our share."

"Not necessary. My company is picking up the tab and I'm going to let them."

"Then we'll send them a check. Who—"

I clucked. "No. Thank you, but that's my final answer on the room." Conversation was going to be limited if we couldn't talk about ourselves. What was I going to do to stay distracted from the beast raging outside in storm-form? I glanced at Nick—it might be fun to see if he was climbable, but I wasn't quite that desperate.

Yet.

He held up another box from the basket. "Dice games."

Tony stepped closer. "*Lover's Dice*," he read.

"I should've read that first." A hint of pink whispered across Nick's cheeks, and he set the box down. How adorable

was that? He was a blusher. “The strawberries looked good,” he said.

I could probably share after all. “They are. I bet they’re even better with the champagne.” I didn’t want to be drunk with the men, but a few sips might help calm me down.

Tony plucked the bottle from the ice. “It’s a decent vintage. If I were actually the newly wed husband, I might think the hotel was trying to steal my new bride away.”

“Lucky for them, you’re not a jealous man,” Nick said.

“Depends on the circumstances.” Tony handed him the bottle. “Do the honors?”

Nick pressed the base of the bottle into his hip.. “I’m not experienced in this, so apologies in advance for not doing it gracefully.” He untwisted the muselet around the neck and cork, gripped the cork, and wiggled.

A loud *pop* filled the room as the cork flew from his hand and champagne burst from the neck of the bottle, spraying both him and Tony.

Was I allowed to laugh? “Low pressure system plus icy cold champagne...” I really wanted to laugh.

When Nick snorted, I stopped holding back, and Tony joined in as well. Tentative giggles turned to full-blown laughter.

As we calmed down, Nick set aside the bottle and undid the top two buttons on his shirt. “We probably need fresh clothes. Maybe we can squeeze out our shirts to fill our glasses.”

I wanted to keep the light mood, but my gaze had frozen on his chest, which he was exposing a tantalizing inch at a

time. Or rather, then hints of inked art I saw underneath.

“Unless you’d like to lick him clean,” Tony said.

I very much would. “I’d like to see the full artwork.” Look at me, behaving myself like an almost adult.

Nick eased his shirt from his shoulders to expose a stunning, intricate wolf.

“Where do we stand on that *licking you clean* idea?” I asked before I realized what I was saying.

Nick straightened, giving me a better view. “Tony’s cousin is a tattoo artist,” he said.

“It’s amazing.” I was reaching for it, to trace the lines of both ink and muscle, and stopped myself. What was coming over me?

Tony’s hand on mine made my pulse spike, and he nudged me forward to touch. Heat flowed through me when my skin connected with Nick’s, and I followed the contours. Nick’s sharp intake of breath and his follow-up whisper of a groan dipped between my legs and made my vagina clench in anticipation.

Nick nodded behind me. “If you think this is amazing, you need to see Tony’s. He’s one of her favorite canvases.”

I turned to look at Tony, whose mouth was quirked in a smirk. I didn’t care if this made him smug, now I had to know. “May I see?”

Tony took his time unbuttoning his shirt, then sliding it down his arms. Arrogant fucker. But when I saw his back, it was worth it.

“*Wow.*” It was a dragon, cast in deep blues and reds and intricate, gorgeous detail. It rippled and writhed with his

muscle every time he moved.

“You can touch it.” He glanced over his shoulder.

I almost didn’t dare, but temptation won out. I trailed along the lines, not sure where to look first. So many details.

Yeah, if I had the chance, I was going to sleep with these men.

Tony whirled, startling me, and grabbed me, holding my wrist and my gaze tightly. “I think we should skip the champagne and get drunk on you,” he said.

My wince slipped out without my permission. *Oops*, I meant to use my indoor face.

He raised his brows. “What was that?” He stopped using the *I’m going to seduce you* tone.

“You’ve gotta stop with the lines.” I’d opened the door for the conversation, might as well walk through it. “I’m standing here thinking about sleeping with you, and then...” I blew a light raspberry.

“What?” He had the grace to look surprised. Good on him. “The American girls love my lines.”

I shook my head. “They love your accent. *I* love your accent. The cheesy lines? Not so much.”

He huffed a sigh. “I guess you want Nick, in that case. He doesn’t use ridiculous lines.”

I glanced back at Nick. “No?”

“No,” he said.

“What do you do instead?” I half expected him to say *stand here and look incredible*.

Instead Nick moved closer, brushed the hair off my neck and dipped his head. He moved his hands to my hips, and his breath teased my skin. “I tell you that I’ve never met anyone like you.” The words rolled off his tongue with ease. “That your voice is like raindrops on piano keys and that the faint scent of vanilla on your skin drives me wild. And then,” he trailed his mouth up to my ear, never quite making contact, “I say that I’ve been fantasizing about you since I met you. About burying my face between your legs and licking your cunt until you’re quivering with desire and your cream is pouring over my tongue.”

Nick let go of me and stepped away. “That’s what *I* do.”

“*Fuck me.*” I didn’t mean to say that out loud either, but that was the hottest fucking thing anyone had ever said to me.

diego (nick)

WHEN LEE MUTTERED *FUCK ME*, it took the last of my restraint not to bend her over the chair and do exactly that. The words I'd spoken hadn't been an act. My desire for her had been building since I saw her, swelling each time I got a taste of her attitude, and I still felt her light touch tracing over my ink.

"I believe there was mention of licking away the spilled champagne?" Raul said.

As much as I liked the idea of Lee's tongue all over my body, I wanted to be the one licking and sucking. "I have a better idea."

Raul raised an eyebrow.

"Do tell," Lee said. "In vivid, complete, tantalizing detail if you would."

"I saw the jetted tub in the bedroom." I loosely grasped her fingers and tugged her in that direction.

When we reached the tub, I turned the hot water knob. A loud groan, the kind that rumbled through our feet, filled the room, and drowned out the thunder, and no water came out. That was bad. I shut the faucet off, and the noise stopped.

Raul frowned and reached past me. When he repeated my actions, he got the exact same result.

Go figure.

A scowl was etched across Lee's face, and she spun away to march to the nearest phone. She picked it up and dialed. "Yeah, hi... I'm in the honeymoon suite, and the tub is broken... Broken as in, it doesn't work? It's making a noise and there's no water coming out... I don't—" She sighed and looked at me. "Does the shower work?"

I headed into the bathroom to check, and a moment later returned to tell her *yes*.

Lee conveyed the message to the person on the phone. After another pause, she said, "No, I understand." Her voice was tight, and her smile was through gritted teeth. "No, it's not your fault. Thank you."

Lee hung up with another heavy sigh. "They're having problems in several rooms, and their plumber can't make it in during the storm."

"And you let it go, just like that?" Raul asked.

She glared at him. "It's not her fault, and yelling at her won't help anyone. She comped the room, and most everyone else will yell at her. Always save the *Karen* for situations where it actually matters." Her long yawn cut her off. "I'm sorry. I've been on non-stop flights for a few days, and it's catching up to me."

"Why don't you shower and head to bed," I said. The sexy mood had vanished, and she looked like she needed some rest.

Lee looked between us. "I'm not the one covered in champagne."

"It's dry now anyway. Thirty minutes more won't matter." Besides, I wanted a few minutes to talk to Raul. "Go."

She hesitated, but not much longer, and then headed into the bathroom.

Raul sank onto the edge of the bed.

“Do you want to fuck her or fight with her?” I teased.

His smile spanned a rainbow of emotion, and was one of the hundreds of things I loved about him. “I’m not the one being difficult,” he said.

“Be fair. You’re frequently the one being difficult.”

He laughed. “But I’m not used to anyone besides you pushing back.”

I shook my head and sat next to him. “In other words, you want her pretty badly.”

“So much so. Tell me you don’t.”

“I very much do.” There was no reason to lie.

Raul leaned into me. “A good night’s sleep ought to either help her come to her senses, or make her more pliable.”

“Either way, she’s a lot of fun.”

Raul pulled away enough to study me. “You have a weird definition of *fun*.”

“You know better than most.” I grinned.

We chatted a little more, but the conversation paused when the bathroom door creaked open. Lee emerged, raking her fingers through her wet hair, her nose wrinkled.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She looked at me, surprise on her face. “Nothing. I’m good.”

“That look didn’t say good.”

“What’s going on?” Raul sounded concerned.

Lee pursed her lips. “Nothing. I’m not a fan of sleeping on wet hair.”

“Grab your brush or comb, and a hair tie.” Raul’s tone said there was no room for disagreement.

Lee looked like she was considering arguing anyway. “Why?”

I had a feeling *because I said so* wasn’t going to fly, but I knew what Raul was up to. He did this for Eloise on a regular basis. “He’s going to fix your hair problem.”

“I don’t...” Lee looked between us. “Okay. You’ve got me curious.” She rifled through her bag, and emerged with a comb. She pulled the black band off her wrist and handed both to Raul.

He pulled a chair away from a desk near the window. “Sit.”

Though Lee raised her brows, she complied.

With practiced efficiency, Raul pulled the comb through her hair enough to take out the tangles. It was very different watching him do this to this stunning woman than with our daughter. He was as gentle, but the way Lee’s eyelids fluttered when he ran his fingers along her scalp, the slight part of her lips when he tugged a little too hard, was alluring.

Within minutes, a neat braid hung down her back.

Lee stood, tugging on the hair, and a soft smile played on her face. “Thank you. Your little girl is lucky.”

“No. We are. To have her.” I didn’t hesitate with the correction. It was time to pull my gaze from this display. “I’ll go next in the shower.”

It was tempting to take my time once I got under the water, but Raul still needed a turn in here, and after having been so close to tasting the delicious creation in the other room, jerking off wouldn't be the same.

When I returned to the bedroom, Raul was sitting near the headboard, pillows propping him up, and Lee was asleep, her head on his upper thigh.

I hadn't expected that, but it was a lovely sight.

We managed to shift her without waking her up, and I took his place while he went to shower.

This was going to be a trip I remembered for a long time, no matter what happened next.

“MORNING, *PRINCIPE*.” Raul's voice tugged me from a pleasant sleep. Though he was kissing me on the forehead, there was still a weight on my chest.

I looked down to see Lee curled up against me. She was starting to stir, and looked stunning with a pink flush to her cheeks and sleepy eyes.

Raul kissed her on the cheek as well. “Morning, *gattina*.”

“Morning.” She sat and stretched, offering a pose any artist would sell their good arm to capture, with her torso elongated, and the thin fabric of her T-shirt highlighting full, round breasts and perky nipples.

She dropped her arms and met my gaze.

I didn't try to hide that I'd been staring.

She pushed her shoulders back, leaving herself on display. “You called me that yesterday, too. *Gattina*. What does it mean?”

“Kitten,” I said. “It’s a term of endearment.”

Raul leaned in to rest his hands on the bed and his cheek near Lee’s. “And in your case, it also means adorable, deceptively sweet, and clawed.” His tone was playful.

“Aww, you noticed.” Lee twisted her head to kiss him on the cheek. “Is it still storming?”

Raul stood again. “There’s some rain, but the bad stuff has passed.”

That gave me an idea. “I don’t suppose you’re familiar enough with the city to take us on a tour?” This was some of the oldest architecture in the country, and I’d always wanted to spend time here. We didn’t have long today, but even a little glimpse would be fun.

“What do you want to see?” Lee asked. She pulled her braid out and her hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders, framing her face.

I was captivated. “Old buildings. The more the better.”

Her grin was back. “My kind of answer. I’ve got the perfect place for breakfast.”

Someone should warn her. “Keep in mind, Raul’s a bit of a food snob.”

“I’m not a snob. I *am* a chef, and I know when someone is cutting corners.”

“You cook?” Lee looked impressed. “That’s such a coincidence.”

“You like to cook?” Raul asked.

“Not so much. But I love to eat.”

I chuckled. This was going to be fun.

Lee grabbed her luggage and stepped into another room to dress, which was reasonable but also disappointing. We dressed while she was gone.

When she emerged she was wearing a loose blouse that was thin enough to hint at what was underneath, and a wrap-around skirt that flowed loosely and hung down to her ankles. It was deceptively chaste.

Raul stepped up next to her and offered his arm. “Shall we be off?”

She hooked her hand through the crook of his elbow. To anyone not in the know, they looked like the perfect couple. Beautiful plus handsome, dressed for a casual but still classy day on the town.

I allowed myself to admire them for a moment. In another time and another place, would we consider seeing if she clicked with us? Seeing if she fit into our life? Eloise’s?

That was a dangerous path to follow, especially with a stranger who clashed with Raul as much as not, who didn’t know our real names, and who was coming back here to another country when her trip was over.

We checked out, and Lee called us an Uber to take us to what she described as the perfect breakfast place for us.

I had no idea what that was supposed to mean, but when we arrived, a bit of a clue started to dawn on me. The street the car dropped us off on was lined with older brick buildings about two to four stories tall. The wet streets glistened in the

lights and morning rain, and around us, people rushed with their heads down toward whatever their destination was.

“Our destination.” Lee gestured toward a glass and aluminum door with the word *bakery* frosted on it in a simple font.

It didn’t look like much from the outside, but in my experience those could be the best places.

We stepped into an entirely different world inside. The first thing that was obvious was the smell—heavenly sweet and savory tinged with coffee.

But I lost track of the scent when I saw the architecture and design. Exposed beams. Stunning stonework. Hardwood that shone, despite the dozens of feet relentlessly hammering it with their existence. “It’s beautiful.” I could pick apart the details for days. I needed pictures, and could already see this place influencing some of my design decisions.

The line serpented several times around a series of stanchions—always a good sign. We took a spot at the end, and were processed through more quickly than I expected.

When we reached the front of the line, none of us could decide on just one thing to try, so we ordered one each of half a dozen different pasties. I insisted on getting the bill, despite Lee’s protests.

“You paid the room tab,” I reminded her.

“The room was comped, because of the tub.”

Perfect. That meant no guilt over her picking up the bill. I handed the cashier my card, plucked Lee’s from her hand and slipped it into the front pocket of her purse.

Lee's mouth twisted as she extracted her card and put it back in her wallet just as mine was returned to me. She huffed, but amusement danced in her eyes.

A short while later, we made our way to a just-vacated and cleaned table, a corner booth in the back of the cafe.

Raul slid in on one side of Lee, and I sat on the other.

She laughed and shook her head. "Is this to keep me from running away?"

"We're not worried about that," Raul said.

I added, "We simply like the way it feels with you sandwiched between us."

Lee's smile grew, and she hid it behind a sip of her coffee. "Me too." The lid of her cup muffled her words, but I heard them all the same. "Anyway." She set her cup down hard enough to splash, and winced. When she grabbed a plastic knife Raul held up his hands.

"We're sorry?" He didn't sound distressed.

"Don't be. Well, maybe *you* should be a little, but not a lot." Lee winked at him. She turned to the pastries we'd bought, and set to work cutting them into thirds with impressive and practiced efficiency. "Help yourselves."

Each of us picked something. I went for the chocolate croissant first, Lee for the fruit tart, and Raul for the blueberry muffin.

I was just here to enjoy the food and company, and it looked like Lee was as well.

Raul on the other hand, picked off little pieces at a time, and savored each one. "It's not bad," he said with the first bite.

“Actually, it’s really good.” Another bite. “Vanilla—obviously. Cinnamon. A hint of lemon...”

He was picking apart the recipe, which meant in the next week, I’d be sampling a series of modifications to his own blueberry muffin recipe, while he decided if he could improve on what he already had.

Lee grabbed a piece of the same muffin, and bounced it lightly between her fingers. “I think it’s completely under proved.”

“It’s not that kind of bread.” Raul gave her a puzzled look.

“It’s a bit stogy?” She finished her portion quickly. She held up a utensil. “Spork?”

I laughed at the antics. I was pretty sure she was quoting that baking show everyone loved, but I had no idea what silverware had to do with it.

Raul was smothering his amusement behind a scowl. “You can’t boil the art of baking down to a few basic buzzwords.”

“Boil. Cooking. I see what you did there. And the *art* of anything can be boiled down to a few buzzwords, depending on your audience,” Lee said. “For instance”—she gestured at the ceiling— “the flying buttresses in this place are divine.”

My own humor wilted. I didn’t want to be disappointed in this woman, even for something like this. “Those aren’t flying buttresses.”

“I know that, and you know that, but Joe Blow doesn’t know or care.” Lee sipped her coffee.

And now I cared entirely too much. Even though it seemed unlikely most people would have the kind of knowledge I did, in this moment I desperately wanted her to speak my language

—architecture, not Italian. “The stonework on the other hand, the blend of polygonal and rubble masonry is simple but effective.”

“It’s a facade.”

I stared at Lee. Another buzzword? “I would’ve noticed.” I turned to the accent wall immediately behind me, and scrutinized it. There was no way I’d been fooled by fake rock. But sure enough... “Wow. You’re right.”

She nodded and her expression said *duh*. “The floor on the other hand, is the original white oak hardwood.”

“I’ve got your hardwood right here.” Raul must have the answers he wanted about his muffin if he was making jokes.

Lee laughed. “Do you ever stop?”

“Do you want me to?”

“No.” Her reply came more quickly than I expected. “I’m still bummed that last night didn’t go anywhere. Don’t get me wrong, I wanted the sleep, but...”

“But what?” I nudged.

“Promises were made, that included orgasms.” She didn’t seem embarrassed by the topic.

Raul dipped his head close to her ear. “We could still make those orgasms happen. This seems like a good spot.”

6

early (lee)

THIS WAS MOST CERTAINLY *NOT* a good place to fulfill promises of orgasms. There were people everywhere. Because we were in one of those U-shaped benches, that curved to fit the corner and only had one bench, anyone walking toward us had a straight view under the table,

But Tony's suggestion mingled with memories of Nick's words from last night, and desire throbbed between my legs in response.

Add to that the thrill of someone catching us...

I was far more turned on than I thought I should be, and when Tony rested his hand on my upper thigh, my pulse kicked up in response.

"What do you think?" he made a simple question sound like the most seductive proposition ever.

"I think I want to see what we can get up to without getting caught," I said.

He slipped his hand under the slit of my wrap-around skirt, and teased his fingers along bare skin. With the length and flow of the fabric I could stay covered, but if someone looked close enough, they'd figure out where his hand was.

No one was paying attention to us, but my heart slammed against my ribs and my legs parted with the anticipation of what came next.

He skillfully tugged half my skirt more and more toward him, without disturbing the other half. Was that a marketable skill? It should be. When he teased his fingers along the crotch of my panties, a gasp escaped my throat. He repeated the gesture, nothing moving but his fingers, with a feather-light glide over fabric.

His barely-there touch was a gentle build to an intensity that had me biting the inside of my cheek to keep from groaning loudly. My nipples dug divots into the padding in my bra, and I had to have soaked through the same spot in my panties that he was focused on.

Nick moved a hand to my thigh, and the added touch cranked my desire up another notch.

Tony pressed in, and I widened my legs to give him more room to maneuver. I wasn't flashing the room yet, but if he kept this up, I'd be tempted.

He stroked harder. Faster. I couldn't come this way. It was too public. Someone was going to see.

But this was so wicked, and it felt so good.

He hit just the right spot, and I grabbed his arm. "Right there," I forced the quiet words through clenched teeth.

His chuckle was tight. "You like that?" he asked quietly.

"God, yes."

He did exactly as I asked, fingering me until I couldn't hold back the whimpers. Until the people in the room were a blur that didn't matter.

When I came, the orgasm consumed me from nowhere, hitting hard and stealing my reason. I dug my fingers into his arm. My cheek was tender from where I bit, and I could taste copper.

When he finally eased up, I was panting to catch my breath. Holy shit, wow.

As the world swam back into view, my fingers started to ache. I was holding Tony's wrist far tighter than I thought, so I released him with an apologetic laugh. "Sorry."

"Not something you ever have to apologize for." He hovered his mouth near my ear, his breath hot on my skin.

Ever. Implying we'd do something similar again. I couldn't see it after today, but the idea was a nice fantasy anyway. Today, though... I wanted to find a place where we could get up to more than just foreplay. The cafe might frown on me straddling one of my dining companions when I sucked the other one off.

"Excuse me." A timid sound drew my attention, and I looked up to see a young man standing at the edge of our table, staring at his feet, his face bright red. "We need to ask you to leave."

"Any particular reason?" Nick asked.

Would I be as embarrassed as the employee if he said *because finger fucking in our booths is against the rules?*

"You're causing a disruption." His voice cracked.

I nudged Nick and Tony. "We should go." Because I was about to collapse in a ball of laughter tinged with *what the fuck did we just do?*

Nick slid out of the way. "Agreed."

“You have great muffins.” Tony growled seductively at the employee as we brushed past.

The poor guy was redder than their cherry pastries.

The instant the door swung shut behind us, cutting us off from the cafe, my laughter burst free without my permission. “Pretty sure that means we were busted.” This was mostly embarrassed amusement.

“I hope they enjoyed the show.” Nick reached for Tony’s hand and the two intertwined their fingers. “I know I did.” Nick wrapped his other arm around my waist as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Should we call for a car? Head back to the hotel? Duck into a side alley and let me return the favor?” I strolled down the sidewalk with them, not breaking the contact.

My phone rang, interrupting any brainstorming, and I reached for it. The number wasn’t familiar, and while I wouldn’t answer that on my personal time, it was during working hours and any number of our clients could be calling.

As I pressed *Answer* and put my phone to my ear, Tony’s phone rang as well, and then Nick’s.

Kind of weird. “Hello?” I said into the receiver.

“I’m calling for Carly Hammond.” The man spoke with a heavy southern drawl.

“This is she.”

“Mrs. Hammond, I’m calling with the airline. We’ve got a flight available to get you to New York, so you can finish your trip.”

I cringed at the *Mrs.* “It’s Ms.” I clipped off the retort. “And when?”

“*Ms.* Of course.” Was that disdain in his reply? “It leaves in about three hours.”

An eternity when one was hungry or needed a restroom. No time at all when it came to making a flight. “I’ll take it. Give me the information.”

I made notes of all of the important details, and was disconnecting at the same time as both men. Apparently their calls were the same.

“Back to the hotel for our luggage, then,” Nick said.

The next few hours moved in a blur of us grabbing our bags, sharing a ride to the airport, and slogging our way through twice as many travelers as normal, thanks to the delayed flights last night.

When we boarded the packed plane, my seat was nowhere near Nick and Tony. Disappointing. And my next flight, out of JFK and heading to Milan, was a different airline than theirs, thanks to my frequent flier perks.

As I settled in to sleep on the long ride across the ocean, disappointment settled in. It was a fun day, one that offered great memories, but I was sad to have it come to an end.

The two of them were good together, though. I hoped they had a great life when they got home.

Sleeping on planes was a necessity in my line of work, as was shrugging off jet lag quickly when I reached foreign destinations. Rather than dwelling on what wouldn’t be, I focused on the incredible parts of the last twenty-four hours or so, and let myself doze in my seat.

When I landed in Milan, I wasn’t refreshed, but at least I wasn’t groggy.

I'd been here enough that I moved on autopilot through customs, and then to the baggage carousel. With my luggage in tow, I scanned the crowds for a sign with my name. Normally I'd take a cab to my hotel, take some time to relax, adjust to the new location... But I was a day behind schedule.

There was my name, printed in neat block letters on a white background. My gut twisted in on itself. Tony and Nick stood directly next to my ride, heads bowed together as they chatted.

Perfect chance to get their numbers... unless things were about to change now that we were on their home turf.

I braced myself for either rejection or enthusiasm, and approached. "I'm Carly Hammond," I said loud enough to be heard over the din.

"Lee?" Nick looked up, and studied me.

I gave him a warm smile. "To my friends. Carly to business associates."

"We made the *friend* list. Not bad." Tony grinned and extended his hand. "Raul Bianchi-Gallo, and my business partner and husband, Diego."

Wait. My brain ground to a halt, backed up, and restarted again. Nope, that didn't help. The sexy Italian men I'd sort-of hooked up with on my layover were the people I was supposed to be mentoring, coaching, and monitoring through the restoration of their new restaurant.

Fuck me. Or maybe I should be grateful they hadn't.

raul

LEE—CARLY— didn't look happy.

I wasn't sure why not. When we left her in Philadelphia, she was all smiles and flirting and sweetness. It wasn't as if I'd used some sort of pick-up line on her when she approached us just now.

To find out we were about to spend a lot more time with her had my blood heated and my imagination racing. This was going to be an incredible few weeks of fun mixed with work.

"Our things are already in the car." Diego reached for her bags. "We can be on our way."

She stepped away. "You lied to me about your names."

Was she serious? "It wasn't a lie, *Lee*. Those are names we use all the time when we travel."

"And to pick up women," she said.

"You gave us a fake name too." Diego nodded at our driver, who stepped in and grabbed her luggage.

She didn't stop him, but her scowl stayed in place. "That's what my sister calls me."

"And men you don't want following you home." I didn't have a problem with the alternates—obviously—but her

attitude felt undeserved.

“It’s different.” Carly didn’t sound like she believed her own words.

It wasn’t different at all. “You did it for anonymity and we did the same. We should get going.” I gestured toward the exit.

Carly clenched her jaw—at least her stubbornness had been real. “Fine.” She fell into step beside us.

Her scowl stayed in place as we stashed her luggage next to ours in the trunk. I held the front passenger door open for her, and she slid in with a tight *thank you*.

“We’ll drop you off at your hotel, so you can check in, then meet you at the building location,” I said when Diego and I were settled in the back seat.

“Sounds good.”

“Are we really going to do this?” I wasn’t interested in a tension-filled few weeks just because of a few swapped nicknames.

Carly looked over her shoulder at me. “We’re not doing anything.” Her tone softened. “And that’s the point. Lee had a lot of fun in Philadelphia, but I’m here on business. The only thing we’re doing is business.”

“As you wish,” Diego said.

I simply nodded. We’d see how long her resolve held up, but not here and now.

We were halfway to Carly’s hotel when Diego’s phone rang. He showed me the screen, which had *Home* and Eloise’s picture on it, as he answered.

Our nanny's face filled the screen, and a loud wailing sounded in the background. The crying was Eloise, and I was instantly on alert.

"I'm so glad you answered." Ariana was in a panic. *"She woke up from her nap in tears, and I don't know why. She says her heart hurts."*

"Daddy. Where are you?" Eloise's cries made me cringe.

"Put her on," I said. We spoke both English and Italian around the house, so she was fluent in both, but the default was Italian.

When our little girl's face filled the screen, my heart cracked, and I knew Diego's was doing the same. She looked miserable.

"What's wrong, Ellie?" Diego asked.

"I miss you. I want you to come home. You were supposed to be home."

We were rarely gone this long, and we'd never been home a day late before. *"We'll be there soon."* I tried to sound as reassuring as I could.

Eloise sniffled. *"I want you home now."*

"Soon, baby," Diego said. *"We love you."*

We spent a few more minutes making sure Eloise was okay until we got home, then I blew her a kiss, and Diego hung up.

How much of a fit would Carly throw if we changed our plans? It didn't matter. We were going home.

"Don't bother dropping me off." Her statement caught me off-guard.

I looked up to find her twisted in her seat, watching us with concern. “Excuse me?”

“I understand enough Italian to get the gist of the call.” Carly looked sympathetic. “Don’t worry about taking me to my hotel. I can catch a cab from your place.”

That was the way things would’ve gone regardless, but if Carly thought it was her idea, things would run more smoothly. “Bless you.”

The driver was already pointing the car toward our apartment. It didn’t take us long to get home. The instant I stepped from the car, Eloise darted from inside the building, her face stained with tears, and attached herself to my legs in a tight hug. Ariana followed behind at a more casual pace.

I loosened Eloise’s grip enough to crouch and bring myself closer to her height, and she threw her arms around my neck instead, nearly knocking me over. “*Hey, what’s wrong?*” I asked, hugging her.

“*I had a dream that your airplane crashed and that you were never coming home and I was so scared.*” Eloise finished her reply with a loud wail.

Diego knelt next to us and settled a hand on her back. He kissed her on the top of the head. “*We’re here now, see? It was just a bad dream.*”

“*And you’re not leaving again?*” she asked through sniffles.

I continued to hold her. “*Not for a while. We’re safe. We’re going to stay safe.*”

“*Okay.*” Eloise hiccupped. “*As long as you promise.*”

I pressed my lips to her cheek. “*Cross my heart.*”

Eloise pulled away and her tears vanished. “*Who are you?*”

Right. Carly was still here, standing next to her luggage and looking a bit uncomfortable.

Our bags had already been taken upstairs.

“This is Carly.” Diego switched to English.

“You’re pretty.” Eloise followed suit.

Carly smiled. “Thank you.” She didn’t look like she felt any less awkward.

“*She’s like an Ariana for Dad and me,*” I teased, switching back to Italian to keep Carly from getting too annoyed with what I was saying.

“*She’s going to babysit you?*” Eloise sounded entertained by the prospect.

“*Exactly.*”

Carly huffed. “Tell me I misunderstood that exchange.”

“Do you babysit my dads?” Eloise looked at her, eyes wide.

Carly wrinkled her nose and furrowed her brow, before saying, “Your English is very good.”

“Thank you. I practice all the time.” Eloise grinned.

I was impressed. It was rare to see a question dodged so masterfully, especially when it came to our persistent little girl. I should probably come clean about who Carly really was, though. “Carly works with us, Eloise. She heard you were sad, and wanted to make sure you were okay before she went to her hotel.”

Eloise hugged me again. “I’m okay now that you’re home.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Carly’s tone was always kind, never condescending, when she spoke to Eloise. Carly turned to us. “Since this crisis is averted, I’m going to check into my hotel. Catch up on a little work...”

I didn’t want her to go. The flash came out of nowhere, and would be an odd thing to say aloud, given all the circumstances. “That’s a good idea.”

“I’ll grab you a taxi,” Diego said.

“Is Carly coming to dinner tonight?” Eloise looked at her. “Are you coming to dinner tonight?”

Diego glanced up from his phone. “It’s been a long few days. Maybe dinner should be moved.”

Eloise whipped out a pout without hesitation. “You promised.”

I never yielded to her just because she looked cute, but in this case Diego and I had promised, and Eloise had been marking the days off her calendar in anticipation. Besides, this particular outing wouldn’t be an option for much longer.

“Dinner where?” Carly asked.

“Raul was going to make one last meal in the new building, in the original kitchen, before reconstruction.”

“We need to get demo started within the week to stay on schedule.” Carly’s voice was apologetic and soft, as it was meant for only my ears.

“Please, Daddy. Please, please, pleeeeeeaaase?” Eloise seemed to hear anyway.

I glanced at Diego, whose shrug said *I’m up for it if you are.*

I was tired. I wanted to sleep in my own bed. But this was a worthwhile detour. “All right,” I relented. “We’ll have dinner at the church tonight, and Carly is welcome to join us, but she didn’t promise you, so she doesn’t have to if she’s not interested.”

“I’d love to see the place one last time before we gut it. And I’m dying to see you make that kitchen work as-is.” Carly had appraised the building before our investors agreed to put their money into this project, so she had a better idea than most what condition it was in.

We made arrangements for later in the day. It was just after three, so I said we’d send a car for Carly at seven, and we’d eat at eight.

I hated to see Carly go, and wasn’t sure why. She was randomly abrasive and had the power to make our professional lives hell. But there was something about her...

None of that mattered.

We gave Ariana the rest of the day off, and took Eloise upstairs, where our loft apartment took up the entire third floor of the building, and looked up at the world through vast skylights that covered the entire ceiling.

Diego had found this place for us when we first decided to take that big step and move in together, years ago. There were things in my past that I regretted, but the apartment, Diego, and Eloise were nowhere near that list.

We gave Eloise the *LOVE* T-shirt we’d bought for her in Philadelphia, along with a rainbow stuffed monkey wearing a matching top. She had to change immediately, to match her new friend, and then regaled us with stories of what she’d done when we were gone.

The nightmare seemed to have vanished from her thoughts. Thank Christ.

As she spun tales about her trips to the park, I couldn't help but see Diego's seriousness and creativity in her. I adored watching her play, tell stories, and just be a kid.

When it was time to head to the church where we planned to build our restaurant, Eloise wanted to help. The three of us decided to walk. We stopped at the various shops along the way to buy ingredients. When we got to the building, Diego took Eloise to go explore, while I dove into dinner prep.

A short while later, Eloise was back to help, so I pulled up a step stool and let her stir the soup, while I kept a close eye on her. It didn't take long for her to decide she was bored, and she ran off to find Diego again.

As I worked, a pleasant breeze blew in through the open kitchen door, and Eloise's happy squeals floated in from random places in the building.

A new voice drifted in, causing me to pause. American. Male. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but something about his tone made me pause.

"Curtis." That was Carly, and if I thought I'd heard her speak coolly, it was nothing compared to the ice in her voice now.

Dinner was at a good point where I could walk away for a few, and I had a feeling I should be out there. I followed the voices to find Carly standing between the kitchen door and the street, her back to the wall, her arms crossed, and flowers clutched in one fist. The man across from her was Curtis Webb, who I'd met on a few occasions and didn't care for at all.

As I approached, Curtis glanced at me. “Mr. Bianchi. Good evening. I was just talking to your overseer about this old building of yours.”

The reason I knew Curtis was because he’d tried to sell us on a brand-new building, rather than using this one. While I wouldn’t say that his newest project was because we’d turned him down, but the parallels were there.

“Ms. Hammond understands the beauty in this structure in a way that’s hard for the average person to appreciate.” I didn’t know what I was walking into, but Carly’s body language made it clear she needed an ally, and I could do that.

“Not everything is like fine wine.” Curtis made a *tsk* sound. “The rest of the world doesn’t necessarily get better with age.” He focused on Carly.

Her entire body went rigid.

This went deeper than the building, didn’t it? It was tempting to punch the man, but I wasn’t the kind of guy who let fists fly, just because. Besides, Curtis didn’t strike me as the type of person on whom a fist to the face would have the right kind of impact.

I wouldn’t let his dig go unanswered, though. Whether it was intentionally directed at Carly or not. “Buildings and people are far too complex to be compared to something as basic as fermented wine juice. Her beauty is in a combination of internal and external construction. The way she stands up to strife. Resilience and architecture relay her true beauty far better than age.” Let him assume if I was talking about the building or Carly.

I dropped my hand and let it brush hers, giving her the hint and the option without forcing the subject. She wove her

fingers through mine.

“Hmm...” Curtis’s gaze fell to our hands. “That’s certainly one opinion. Make sure you’re not missing something important in your infatuation.”

“I’m not,” I said.

“I’ll see you both around town. Enjoy the rest of your evening.” Curtis turned away and walked to the main street before vanishing around the corner.

The instant he was gone, Carly muttered, “Thank you.”

The way she was almost sunken in on herself was nothing like the women I’d met. “Do you know him?”

“He’s my ex-husband.”

Oh.

8

diego

ELOISE and I came back to the kitchen, to see what kind of help Raul needed finishing dinner. He was nowhere to be found, but voices reached us from the back alley.

“Company.” Eloise grabbed my hand and tugged.

I pulled her back gently, forcing her to stay behind me as we approached. One of the voices was Raul, the other was Carly.

We stepped outside as she said, “My ex-husband.”

“You came.” Eloise broke away from me and ran up to Carly.

“Of course I did.” Carly crouched to her eye level. “I couldn’t refuse such a splendid invitation.”

The tension out here was heavy, and Raul was pale with a dark expression that looked like he’d just found out the cream he bought that was supposed to be fresh had gone rancid.

I gave him a *what’s going on* look.

His shrug and glance at Eloise said *I’ll tell you later*.

That ought to be an interesting story.

Carly stood again, and looked at me. “Good to see you again.” Her voice was tight.

“You too.” I meant it.

She held out a paper-wrapped bundle of freshly cut flowers. “I wasn’t sure what you were making, so I didn’t know what kind of wine or sweets would pair with it. I brought the centerpiece instead.”

“They’re lovely, thank you.” I gave her a reassuring smile, though it felt odd to do so without knowing why she needed to be reassured. “Ellie, why don’t you take Carly to find a vase, and put the flowers on the dinner table, while Dad and I bring out food?”

“Okay. Come with me.” Eloise reached for Carly’s hand and yanked her inside.

The instant they were out of sight, Raul leaned his weight against a nearby wall with a soft sigh.

“What was that?” I asked aloud this time.

He shook his head and let out a long sigh. “Curtis Webb is her ex-husband.”

“*Oh.*” I’d need a minute to think up a more comprehensive response. Curtis had talked a great game when he approached us, but not only did his vision not align with ours, but all of our due diligence also said most of his promises were smoke and mirrors. “And?”

“I don’t get the impression she likes him any more than we do.”

It was reasonable that I was relieved at the news, and that she wouldn’t get along with an ex. After all, she was a business partner, and he was a rival. But my reaction felt like it was tied to more than the professional.

“So what do we do?” Raul asked.

I didn't know which part of the situation he was focused on, but it probably wouldn't change my answer. "Keep him the fuck away from her and otherwise, it's business as usual."

"Agreed." Raul pushed away from the wall. "Help me bring the food out to the table?"

"Of course."

We grabbed the soup and bread and carried it out to the small dining table just outside the kitchen.

Eloise and Carly were already seated next to each other, with Ellie mimicking our guest's straight back posture.

I wouldn't complain about a good influence like that.

"What are your intentions toward my dads?" Eloise asked as Raul and I set the food on the table.

Where did she learn English like that? I needed to take a look at her online video history or ask Ariana what she'd been teaching our little girl.

"Carly works with us." Raul took Eloise's soup bowl and filled it, before moving on to everyone else's.

Eloise looked at him with pursed lips. "I didn't ask you."

"Ellie." I put enough reprimand in my voice to let her know she was being rude.

She pouted. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

One corner of Carly's mouth twitched up, but she recovered quickly. "My bosses very much believe in this restaurant, and so do I. I'm here to make sure the rest of the world sees how wonderful your dads' idea is."

"Well I think you're the perfect person for the job." Eloise had already recovered from the mild scolding.

I thought Carly was right for the job too, but I was curious how Eloise had formed an opinion in such a short period of time.

Carly smiled. “You’re right, I am. How did you know?”

“You’re pretty, and you have pretty shoes, and you’re really smart.”

Apparently Eloise had been learning more from Raul than I realized.

“Thank you,” Carly said. “You’re pretty smart, too.”

“And pretty?”

Carly’s mouth twitched again. “And pretty.”

“Your food is getting cold,” I nudged Eloise’s soup closer.

“Okay.” She ate daintily, sipping from her spoon, trying her best not to make a mess.

Raul took a seat next to me. “You won’t get the full plating experience tonight, Carly. I apologize. It’s difficult to manage the full experience with a staff of one.”

“I’m not complaining at all,” Carly said. “Pretty servings are great for photos and spreading the word, but I’m here for the food and the company. Both of which are exquisite.”

Eloise frowned. “What’s x-quiz-it?”

“It’s something that’s really good, plus extra,” Carly said. “Like when you get a banana split, and they give you an extra cherry on top.”

“They do that?” Eloise’s eyes grew wide. “What’s a banana split?”

“Do you know what an ice cream sundae is?” Carly’s tone stayed kind the entire time, never hinting at condescension or

anything similar.

Eloise nodded.

“A banana split is when you split a banana in half, and put an ice cream sundae on top of it,” Carly said.

Eloise gasped. “They can do that?” She looked at Raul. “Daddy, you need banana splits on your menu. It would be quiz-it.”

I swallowed a laugh, almost able to hear Raul’s mental scream of horror at the idea of adding something so pedestrian to his world class menu. “She may be onto something.” It was a struggle to keep my tone serious.

Raul shot me a *don’t you dare* look. “I have a big list of things to consider for the menu. I’ll add that to the *I’ll think about it* column.”

“Yay.” Eloise clapped.

We chatted through dinner about the mostly-banal—what kind of weather Carly could expect while she was here, where she needed to make sure she visited, and Eloise told her where the best parks were.

Dessert was a homemade gelato—one of Raul’s specialties.

Eloise had lost patience with eating like a prim and proper princess, and shoveled a large spoonful into her mouth. “Ismffquztly?”

“Swallow first,” I told her.

Carly snickered from behind her napkin, and Raul grinned.

Apparently Eloise wasn’t the only one who was losing patience with being good. She made a show of finishing her

bite of dessert. “Isn’t this quiz-it, Carly?”

“It most certainly is.” Carly ate her gelato at a more sedate pace. “Fresh cream?”

“And hand churned,” Raul replied.

Yup, we were breaking down into innuendo territory. Which I loved the idea of, but not with young ears around. “When we’re done eating, would you like the grand tour?” I asked. “I realize you’ve already seen the place, but not through our eyes.”

“I’d love that,” Carly said.

We finished dessert and coffee. Clean-up in the kitchen went quickly with four of us—Eloise was an expert at helping dry—and it wasn’t long before we were taking Carly on a tour of the building.

The property was built hundreds of years ago as a church, and had been privately held by the same family almost as long. When Raul and I stumbled on the stunning old building, we knew it was the perfect place for our first restaurant. We wanted to respect the original use and architecture, but also breathe new life into the building.

There was already a lot of buzz around what we were doing—two men married to each other, using historic Catholic architecture to earn our way. Whether that was good or bad depended on whom one asked, but for us it was all good publicity. Raul already had a reputation in Europe as a highly recruited head chef from other restaurants—the kind of name that brought in diners, despite those places not being his. And I’d worked on several restorations locally, bringing modern to life without destroying history.

When this location worked, we had plans to expand across Europe, and then move into the US.

The four of us strolled through the structure and grounds, and I pointed out our plans to Carly—where the main dining room would be and the individual large party rooms. She oohed and ahed over the architecture and stained glass, which was the sexiest thing I'd seen her do to date.

When we reached the chapel, Carly stopped in the entrance, and cast her gaze around the room. The statues were gone, and the relics of course, but the pews, podium, and windows remained. "Still my favorite spot. So much gorgeous work." Awe filled her voice.

Eloise pulled her hand from mine and ran down the aisle. "Daddy, I can do a cartwheel. Wanna see?"

"Not inside. You know the rules." I kept my voice stern but calm. First time was a reminder.

She pouted. "But I'll be careful. I wanna show Carly my cartwheels."

"Ellie." Second time was a warning, but it was clear to me that Eloise was getting bored. I wasn't ready to wrap things up, but we may need to. "And this is where we'll have weddings," I said to Carly.

"*Yay*, weddings." Eloise hurried toward the front of the room.

Raul sighed, but he was smiling. "No running," he called after her.

"God, to have that much energy," Carly said softly.

I knew what she meant.

Eloise walked up to the top step of the dais. “Okay. Time to have a wedding. Carly, your skirt is pretty, so it can be your wedding dress.”

An image flashed in my mind—Carly in an actual wedding dress, and Raul and I being the lucky guys to take it off her at the end of the day. Preferably in a suite a lot like the one we’d just stayed in. I shook the thought aside—there were so many reasons that fantasy was a bad idea, starting with how little we knew Carly. Then there was our professional connection to her, and the fact that she lived in a different country.

“Carly doesn’t want to get married,” I said as much for Eloise’s benefit as my own.

Eloise’s pout was back. “But then I’d have a mommy again.”

The words tugged on my heart hard enough to hurt.

“*If* we had a wedding, it would only be pretend.” Raul stepped in.

Eloise jutted her lip out further. “I *know*. A pretend wedding. A pretend mommy. It’s just fake. *Please*.” As she begged, she skipped down the steps, grabbed all three of our hands, and pulled us closer to the podium.

“Who do you think I’m going to marry?” Carly asked.

I should put an end to this. Say that it was time to go home, and wrap up for the night. But fake weddings were far less dangerous than cartwheels through wooden pews, and Eloise had behaved all night.

She made a broad sweeping gesture with her arms. “All of you get married to each other.”

“Dad and I are already married,” I said.

Eloise nodded. “Yes. And now you will both marry Carly.”

I liked the idea far more than I would admit out loud. I looked at Raul, who gave a faint shrug of acceptance, so I turned to Carly and dropped to one knee. The blush that spread across her face was worth the gesture, but I was going to take things a step further. “Carly Hammond, with your pretty shoes and stunning mind, would you make us the happiest dads alive by being our fake bride?”

I wasn’t sure whose laugh was more musical—Eloise’s or Carly’s. Carly tugged me to my feet. “I will.”

“Yay.” Eloise clapped. “Okay, everyone line up.” She positioned Raul on one side of Carly and me on the other, then stood in front of us again. “Wuv. Wuv bwings us togevew. I’m gonna take no more chances but to make a short version.”

Was it obvious we’d let her learn some of her conversational English from old movies? Probably.

“Do you, Daddy?” She looked at Raul.

“I do.”

She turned to me. “And do you, Daddy?” I nodded.

Eloise looked at Carly. “And will you marry my daddies?”

“I will.” Carly looked like she was trying not to laugh.

“You may kiss the bride.” Eloise hopped down the steps and ran past us.

9

early

I DIDN'T MIND KIDS—OTHER people's kids—but I'd never wanted my own. However, Eloise performing a fake wedding ceremony was more aww-inspiring than puppy videos.

As she brushed past us, Raul grabbed her wrist and swung her into his arms in a single, fluid motion. She squealed in delight. He leaned in and gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

Kissing the bride, I got it, but I was still disappointed it wasn't more.

Diego gave me a similar kiss, and moved his mouth to my ear. "She thinks *real kisses are gross*," he whispered.

Ah. When they were done by the wrong guy, they certainly were. I wasn't worried about that here.

Eloise squirmed in Raul's arms. "Daddy, I want to go home."

"We probably should." He gave me an apologetic look.

"No worries. I need to head out anyway." Not because I had anywhere to be, but because these were one of our clients, and I needed to remember this was a professional agreement. It didn't matter that I wasn't ready for the night to end.

Eloise screeched at a cringeworthy volume. “No. She’s my new mommy. She has to come home with us.”

“*Pretend.*” Raul held her tighter.

This was the point in the evening where the kid got tired, and I was happy to send them home with their parents.

So why was I considering heading back to their apartment with them?

“I’ll walk you out to grab a cab,” Diego said.

Eloise pouted. “I want Carly to tuck me in.”

Was my heart breaking? No, because I was an ice queen, and a little girl on the verge of a tantrum didn’t change that.

“Carly’s going back to her hotel,” Raul said.

I leaned into Diego and muttered, “I don’t mind. I can stroll back with you if you’d like.” Was my heart melting? It was clear these men spoiled their girl, but how they raised her was up to them. And I liked the excuse to hang around a little longer.

“Daddy D.” Eloise huffed.

Diego glanced at me, and sighed. “Carly will tuck you in, but you have to remember she doesn’t live with us. She’s not staying.”

“Okay.” Like that, Eloise’s pout was gone. She twisted free of Raul’s grip, landed on her feet, and ran up to my side. When she grabbed my hands, hers was so tiny. She tugged me toward the exit. “Let’s *go.*”

“Do we need to grab anything?” I asked Raul.

He shook his head. “It can all stay here.”

We headed out, he locked up, and we were on our way. Milan at night was as gorgeous as during the day. Streetlamps lit the blend of old and new, highlighting stone in the buildings and on the sidewalks. Architecture older than my entire country towered above us, and there were as many people walking around us as there were cars on the road.

The sounds, the scents, it was all like being in a fairytale.

Eloise held my hand tightly, and pointed out all her favorite places along the way. By the time we reached their apartment, I knew where the best places were to play, get ice cream, and who had the yummiest pastries.

Honestly, the important stuff. Maybe I needed six-year-olds as a tour guide more often.

I envied the architecture of the building they lived in. The stonework, the color, and the warmth and history it radiated. They were on the top floor, in a loft with an expansive skylight that let the stars shine down on them from the velvet sky.

“I’ll give you the tour,” Diego offered for the second time tonight.

Raul took Eloise to get her ready for bed.

Their décor was a combination of modern and classic—steel and glass and stone, except for the sofa in the living room that looked worn and loved and like a family regularly used it to sit together and watch movies.

Exactly the way a living room couch should look, in my opinion.

At the top of a winding staircase was their office, overlooking the rest of the house and stealing the best part of the sky view. I could easily picture Diego sitting at the drafting table, working through a design.

On the main floor, the kitchen was clean. Sleek. And as obviously Raul's domain as upstairs had been Diego's.

Eloise's room was on one side of the apartment, and the men's was on the other, by a guest room.

"She used to sleep next to us, but she announced about six months ago that she was too old to live in the room next to ours," Diego said.

That was precocious, and fell in line perfectly with the little girl I had dinner with. "She's only six. Wait until she's sixteen."

"Never." Diego laughed. "I'm never letting her grow up."

Raul joined us again, Eloise in his arms. Her hair was brushed into a braid, and she was wearing a purple nightgown. "I'm a forest fairy," she said.

Harmony—Daria's youngest girl—would love her. "Forest fairies have to sleep at night, so they can help visitors during the day, right?" Not what I wanted to say, but I was trying hard not to scar her.

Eloise scrunched up her nose. "No. Forest fairies sprinkle dust so everyone can fly."

And never grow old and be lost boys forever. "That sounds like fun."

"It is." She hopped from Raul's arms, grabbed my hand, and tugged. "Tuck me in."

We moved to her room. Fortunately, I'd watched Daria's kids a few times and had a good idea of how this should work. The stuffed bunny on Eloise's bed was well-loved, so I picked it up. "Who's this?"

"Tweety."

Ah—what? “That’s such a good name for a bunny. How did you come up with it?”

“It’s a stupid name for a bunny.” Eloise stuck her tongue out at me. “And I tried to tell her that, but she said she’s yellow, and she sounds just like Tweety Bird, and she said that’s her name.”

Oh. I couldn’t argue with that logic, so instead I pulled back her blankets and patted the mattress for her to climb in.

She scrambled into bed, took Tweety from me when I handed it—her—over, and let me pull the covers up. “Thank you for coming to dinner with us,” she said.

“You’re welcome. Have sweet dreams.” With a little luck, she wouldn’t ask me to tell her a story. She obviously had a broader imagination than I did.

Raul and Diego each gave her kisses and hugs and goodnight wishes, and we left her to sleep.

“Do you want to stay a little longer?” Raul asked. “We can open a bottle of red and chat.”

That was a bad idea. Wait, scratch that. Accepting their dinner invitation was a bad idea, but technically it could be called a business meal. Coming back here at all was a bad idea, but how was I supposed to tell Eloise *no*?

Sticking around longer, and drinking, was a horrible, no good, very bad idea. But I didn’t want to leave yet. “I shouldn’t drink anymore. We have work to do in the morning.”

“But you’ll stay.” Diego rested a hand at the small of my back, and nudged me toward the living room.

“I don’t think it’ll hurt for me to stick around for a little longer.” It could hurt a lot—my career, my libido when it

didn't get what it wanted... But I was sticking by my answer.

I settled into a chair, and they sat on a sofa across from me.

"I've been thinking..." Raul was so much a part of this place. It was clear this was his domain and he knew he was one of the kings. "None of this would have happened—all the things between us—if we'd met you when we were at the Raphael Group in Salt Lake City."

I knew what he meant, but at the same time, "Some of it would've happened. The storm. The flight delay. I definitely would've invited you back to my room." Or gotten them another one. Their business plan was well thought out, well researched, and would make our partners millions as it went global. The kind of money restaurants didn't normally make.

"Would you have let me finger you under the table?" Raul asked.

Heat spread across my cheeks. "No."

"See?" Diego winked at me.

And I was out of arguments. I also wanted to stop talking about the impromptu orgasm that had been one of the most fun but also embarrassing of my life. "I was supposed to be at the meeting, but I had a visit run long in Chicago. I was literally back home long enough to sleep, pack clean clothes, and hop on another plane."

"That's got to be rough, traveling so much. Not seeing home." Diego's frown said he was having a hard time impinging it.

But I loved it. "It's the life I chose, and I get to see so many amazing places." These days it could be a little much. Sometimes I missed stability, like when I barely had a night

between trips, and I saw more of the hotel rooms than my condo. But overall, I still loved it.

“What’s your favorite place you’ve ever been?” Raul asked. “Or rather, if I were going to take my husband on a surprise trip, where should I take him?”

Diego laughed. “It’s not a surprise if I’m sitting right here while you plan it.”

I liked watching the way they played off each other. It was obvious they belonged together. “Have you ever been to Angkor Wat, Cambodia?”

Raul wrinkled his nose, and I knew instantly where Eloise had gotten the look from.

“No, but I’ve always wanted to go.” Of course Diego knew what I was talking about. Stone buildings, ancient architecture, and amazing culture.

“There you go. Next birthday sorted.” I bit back the urge to offer to be their tour guide. At least I could show a *teensy* bit of restraint.

Raul leaned in, elbows on his knees and gaze on me. “Speaking of celebrations, between the honeymoon suite and the wedding, I feel like the universe is trying to tell us something.”

I wanted to make a joke about bad wedding planners, but my sister had lived the ultimate as far as that was concerned, and it still felt too soon to bring it up. “Tell us what?”

“Well, weddings and honeymoons usually mean honeymoon sex.”

“Which should be off the table, given our working relationship.” I didn’t want to argue. I kind of hated myself for

arguing. But I was a professional.

Raul raised an eyebrow. “You said *should be*.”

Did I? Oops.

Diego stood and crossed the short distance between us. He offered me a hand.

When I grasped his fingers, he tugged me to my feet and swept me into his arms in a single, smooth motion.

I swallowed a squeal, not wanting to wake up Eloise. “What are you doing?”

“Taking this conversation someplace more private.” Diego carried me into the bedroom, on the other side of the apartment from Eloise’s. He set me on my feet in the middle of the room.

So this was what *conflicted* felt like. On the one hand—I hadn’t agreed to anything, they were making assumptions, and they were clients. On the other hand...

God they were sexy, and I really wanted to see what we could get up to.

Raul moved behind me and rested his hands on my hips. “With those romance novels you read, you probably have some high expectations.”

“Mutual respect and orgasms. Not that high.”

“And not at all unreasonable.” Diego rested his hand at the base of my throat with enough weight to tease but not to squeeze. “We shouldn’t do this.”

Disappointment whispered through me that he was agreeing with the more reasonable part of me. “No, we really shouldn’t.”

“What if we say *just this once*?” Raul pressed into my back and slid his fingers to rest on my stomach.

Damn it if this wasn't far more tempting than it should be.

Raul's offer bounced in my head. *Just this once* never worked in books, but this was real life, and it didn't require a happily ever after between the three of us, all wrapped up neatly in 300 or so pages. If I married every guy I had a one-night stand with, I'd have a larger harem than any author would dare write about.

“It would make it easier to work together moving forward.” I was convincing myself as much as agreeing with him.

Raul tapped a light rhythm against my stomach, teasing. “And it would get rid of that question of *what if*.”

“Because we'd already know the answer.” No more wondering about what sex was like with them, or if there would be regrets that things didn't go further in Philly. I met Diego's gaze. “We'd all have to be on board.”

“We are.” Diego dipped his head and claimed my mouth. His kiss was intense and hard—the kind of sensation I felt in my toes. Without any words, but with a skilled tongue, his mouth made demands that practically stripped my panties off on its own. “Besides,” he murmured between tiny bites along my bottom lip, “I haven't had a chance to taste you yet.”

How had my clothing not spontaneously combusted yet? Those words, that voice... “Promises promises,” I said playfully.

“Damn right.” Diego's growl rumbled through me.

Raul brushed my hair from my neck and drew his mouth along the bare skin. The nibbling and sucking raced over my

body.

While he distracted me in the most delicious way, Diego undid the top button on my dress, and then the next, and the next, moving down the front until my dress hung open, and he was on his knees at my feet.

With a nudge of Raul's mouth against one shoulder and his fingertips on my other, my dress fell to the ground, leaving me in nothing but my panties—the bodice of the dress had been support enough for my less-than-ample breasts.

Was this already hotter than I'd imagined, being worshiped by two men, not knowing which to focus on, and wondering who was going to do the next thing to make my pulse race? Yes. Yes it was.

Diego pressed his lips to my hip, at the edge of the elastic, and dragged his teeth along the fabric of my underwear. The tingle caused by friction made me gasp, and a groan escaped when he nipped at the patch that covered my pussy.

And then he pressed his mouth in, licking and nipping through cotton, while Raul kneaded my breasts and rolled my nipples between his fingers. Need surged inside me, mounting until my panties were soaked, both from Diego and desire. I was swaying on my feet and my head was pleasantly light and fuzzy.

“I knew I'd like the sounds you make when you're turned on.” Raul's whisper brushed my skin.

And here I thought I was being quiet.

Diego hooked his fingers in the elastic of my lingerie and dragged my panties down my legs. I stepped out and he tossed them aside, making sure I was steady on my feet again before

burying his face against my bare skin. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep a cry from escaping.

From behind me, Raul glided his touch down my spine, sending a pleasant shiver racing up. He traced along the curve of my ass, and slipped his hand between my legs, forcing them apart. A gasp escaped my throat when he plunged his fingers inside me.

Diego licked from my opening up to my clit, devouring me like dessert. He wrapped his mouth around my swollen bud and flicked with his tongue. With him bathing me in pleasure, and Raul pumping inside me, the room spun and the outside world fell away.

The only thing I had to hold onto was Diego, and I gripped his hair for all I was worth. Pleasure built inside, swelling, growing, pushing at the edges of my restraint...

Until orgasm washed over me. Holy...

Unf.

Yummy.

Diego pulled away and I wobbled. A light giggle flitted past my lips. My legs didn't work. How about that?

Raul guided me to the bed, laying soft kisses along my shoulder before he sat me on the edge, then he turned to Diego. Raul offered a hand up. "Well? That looked like fun."

"You're the one with the million-dollar tastebuds, you tell me." Diego gripped the back of Raul's neck and crushed their mouths together, sharing my taste. The passion and love that flowed between them was tangible. The way they dove into the kiss, the tangling of their tongues... Then they were unbuttoning each other's shirts, and pushing those out of the way.

I was getting hotter just watching them, but not because it was two men kissing. Because it was obvious how much in love they were, and how much they were enjoying each other.

A pang echoed in my chest, a whisper of *I want that*, but it was easy to bury under fascination and desire.

Through the kisses, they continued to undress each other—belts, trousers—and then they were naked. Raul turned to me and tugged me to my feet.

“Watching you and Diego kiss makes me want a taste of my own,” he said.

“Now that’s a good line.”

His grin made my insides gooey. “Of course it is.”

Raul’s kiss was more playful than Diego’s, but no less intense, my nude body molding to his, his erection digging into my stomach. He tugged my hair to expose more of my neck, and bit lightly along the skin. When he used his full body to push me back, I was caught off-guard, and fell onto the bed with a laugh and a squeal. They were making it hard to stay quiet.

I scooted into the middle of the mattress, and Raul knelt between my legs, pressing his knee to my core. He pinned my arms above my head as he found my mouth with his again. I’d wonder where Diego was, but this was too much fun. The intensity plus the fun were like spicy food chased with margaritas—I was probably going to regret both in the morning, but for very different reasons and right now they were incredible together.

Raul reached above us, into a drawer next to the bed, and pulled out a condom.

Being worshiped was fun, but I wanted to play and tease a little too. I took the condom from him, tore open the foil, and reached between us to put it on him. His low groan and the way his eyes rolled back when I wrapped loose fingers around his shaft was incredible.

Raul pressed closer, mouth gliding along my skin. “I’ve been captivated since I first saw you. I want to watch your face when you come. I want to see your stunning expression when you climax.”

With the mood in the room, the want, his words were another layer of seduction, weaving together and wrapping me in desire.

Raul teased the head of his cock along my slit, up and down, bumping my clit over and over, before finally sliding inside me. This time I groaned at the same time as he did. *Fuck* that felt good. He was big enough to stretch me out, and he entered me slowly, drawing that feeling out.

He didn’t increase the pace once he was in me, either. He withdrew almost to the tip of his cock, at a glacial glide, before plunging deep again. I wanted to let out a loud moan with each penetration, but I settled for a muted sigh.

Diego joined us on the bed, stroking himself. He grabbed my nearest hand and moved it to his cock, to help stroke. His grip was firm and commanding.

Perfect.

Raul picked up the pace, hammering harder. Pressing my knees to my chest and pinning me in the most delicious pretzel shape. He moved one hand to my clit, and circled with his thumb, while he fucked me. While I stroked Diego.

This was incredible. The attention, the sensations. The men. All of it. I wanted to fall into it and stay there forever. Or at least for a very long time. As the three of us moved together, pleasure built inside me again, growing and swelling, until orgasm crashed over me.

I came hard, squeezing Raul, and he increased his pace in kind, drawing out my climax. My grip fell away from Diego as I tumbled into the sensations.

A warm spray hit my chest as Diego finished, stroking himself and covering me.

Raul dug his fingers into my thighs, and his grunts, his drive, told me he was finishing as well.

The blend of all of it kept me tangled in pleasure, even as the desperation faded and the grunting became the three of us trying to catch our breath.

This was amazing. Worth breaking a rule like *never sleep with a client*. The kind of forbidden I didn't regret, that would stay with me for a long time.

I'D RARELY BEEN MORE grateful that I limited my undressing to a single room with a one-night stand. Raul and Diego were still sleeping, and I wanted them to stay that way until I was gone.

With the moonlight streaming through their massive windows, it was easy to slip my clothes back on, and tiptoe from the room. I found my shoes by the front door, slipped them on, and slipped quietly from the house.

The city looked different at three in the morning. Streetlights caught different things than sunlight did, and the entire city had a more ancient, reverent feel. Like I was walking on holy ground.

A wave of loneliness swept in from nowhere, gripping my heart and stealing my breath. It was only seven or eight back home. I sent Daria a quick text. *Hey. Any requests while I'm here?*

My phone rang seconds later, with a return call from her.

“*Ciao,*” I answered.

“Are you all right?”

One corner of my mouth tugged up, but sadness sank in. “What makes you think anything is wrong?”

“Because I know what time it is where you are.”

Right. “I don’t know. I’m just feeling... *off.*” As I talked, I walked in the direction of my hotel, my footsteps slow, and the city closing in around me.

“D deficiency?” Daria teased.

D as in *dick*. We joked with each other a lot about that. Or we had, before she got herself two sexy young boyfriends who adored both her and her kids. Another foreign pang echoed in my chest. “That’s definitely not it.”

“Ooh, does that mean you have a story to tell? Wait, if you’re sad, it must not have been good D. Do you need a different dose?” She was half playful, half concerned.

And suddenly I didn’t want to talk about sex. I didn’t want to share the details, or even the vagaries, of the last two days. I always wanted to talk about sex. I loved to make sex jokes and tease my friends about having sex and brag about the good sex

and complain about not getting enough sex, but tonight... “I don’t know. I’m just off.”

“So you said. What’s up?” Like that, her light tone was replaced with pure sympathy.

I worked my jaw a few times. Whatever I said, Daria would listen, but I couldn’t find the words. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s this stuff with Curtis.” Great. Bringing up my ex would make me feel more grounded. *Not.*

“You’re going to own this project,” Daria said. “You’re going to make this thing shine and stomp his dick into the ground with the gorgeous pair of new heels you’ve already picked out to spend your bonus on.”

I had to smile at her confidence in me, and the fantastic visual. “Yeah, I am.”

“You can talk. I’ll listen. I’ve got all night.”

“I know.” I stopped in front of my hotel. “But I should get some sleep.” What a shitty brush-off. It was the best I had, though.

“Okay.” Daria sounded resigned. “I’m here if you change your mind. Call me, no matter the time.”

“Thanks.” I wouldn’t be calling her though. I’d sleep off the rest of my jet lag, I’d relegate the last day or two to memories, and in the morning I’d be myself again. Cool, collected Carly who didn’t let men distract her and who loved her traveling lifestyle and perfect single life.

10

raul

IT WAS DISAPPOINTING to find Carly gone in the morning, but not a surprise. It was probably also for the best, given everything.

Still, last night lingered in my thoughts. The fun was something I'd remember for a long time.

Diego wandered out from the bathroom, his hair damp, a towel around his waist. *God*, he was sexy. I was so fucking lucky to have him, and when the towel fell away, that point was driven home.

He pulled on his boxers. He'd scowled when I gave him this pair, with rubber ducks on it, but he wore them without question. "I've been thinking..." Despite his casual tone, I already knew what was underneath.

The thought had crossed my mind too, but I'd dismissed the idea. "It would be nice to have a third in our relationship again."

I wouldn't try to deny that. We discussed it on a regular basis, and we were both on the same page. When we'd married Eloise's mother almost a decade ago, Diego and I were both happy with the commitment. With all three of us being

together, with not caring who Eloise's biological father was, and with the entire arrangement.

Isabella, Eloise's mother, had decided she didn't like it, but Diego and I were still right there, feeling like finding the right woman would make our relationship... more whole.

"What if that person turned out to be Carly?" Diego asked. "Not that we know her well enough right now, but there's something there. Do you feel it?"

"Nope." I was already set with my answer, and my reasons. Top of the list, "She's American. She lives in the States. She has an entire life there."

Diego frowned. "But she gets along so well with Eloise."

"So does everyone. Ellie is a princess that wraps the world around her finger." Which we'd both encouraged, either intentionally or otherwise.

Diego finished dressing. "You're still thinking about it, or you wouldn't know what I was talking about."

"That doesn't mean it's a good idea. It just means I liked fucking Carly as much as you did," I'd already showered and gotten ready for the day. We had a meeting at the cafe downstairs in about fifteen minutes.

With a shake of his head, Diego reached for the doorknob. "You're such an asshole sometimes."

And so was he, when the situation required it. I wasn't being unreasonable about this, though. I stopped him from opening the door with a hand on his. "I don't want to be the bad guy on this." I softened my tone. "But you know as well as I do all the reasons that it's a bad idea to even entertain this thought. After what happened with Isabella..."

She'd decided the idea of having two husbands and a child was far more fun to imagine than to live, and she walked away to pursue her career.

"I know." Diego sighed.

Carly had a reputation for being the best at her job, and so far she'd proven that to be true, in addition to being a lot of fun to spend time with. But that didn't mean she should have a permanent place in our lives, and considering it felt like a straight line to disappointment when things didn't work out. And I refused to consider what it would do to Eloise.

I kissed Diego on the cheek. "We'll find her, whomever and wherever she is, but for now... let's go conquer the world."

We made sure Eloise was ready to go, though she was already up and dressed and talking about how she was going to have breakfast with Uncle Antonio. I expected a discussion over whether or not she could bring one of her stuffed toys to keep us company, but the fact that she didn't ask was a testament to how much she was looking forward to the morning.

Ariana would meet us at the cafe a short while into the meeting, and take Eloise for the day, but Antonio wanted to see her as much as she did him.

Antonio Bianchi Junior was my cousin, and president of the biggest tech company in the country. Not that Italy was known for its software innovation, but the business was big globally, too. Thanks in part to his father, but as much to Antonio when he'd taken over a few years ago, after Tony Sr retired.

Antonio had made the contact for us at The Raphael Group, though we'd still had to win the investment ourselves, and he was introducing us today to a woman he said was one of the best social media managers out there.

I was familiar enough with that side of the business to realize that just making a few posts now and then wouldn't cut it, especially since a lot of our diners would come from people who posted pictures of their food online, and followed it up with praise.

Mila was supposed to know how to leverage all of that to our advantage.

Diego, Eloise, and I headed downstairs to find Antonio already waiting with a brunette who looked about ten years my junior.

Eloise squealed and ran up to Antonio to hug his legs. He ruffled her hair and picked her up. "Hey, Smurf."

She scowled. "I'm not a Smurf."

Antonio tugged at the sleeve of her blue sweater. "Are you sure?"

"I'm Sonic the Hedgehog. Zip, zip, *zoom*." She squirmed.

Antonio set her down, and Diego snagged her hand before she could race away.

"Sorry we're late." I exchanged brief hugs with Antonio. We weren't late, but propriety insisted I offer the platitudes.

"Nah. We're early," Antonio said. "Mila wanted to see the neighborhood and get a feel for the vibe. This is Mila, by the way."

She extended her hand and Diego and I each shook it and introduced ourselves.

“There’s a fantastic vibe here,” she said as we took our seats. “It’s all going to work great for building on your existing brand.”

Diego sighed and pulled out a chair for her. He scooted it in as she sat. “Our life is not a *brand*,” he said.

I pulled Eloise into my lap as the rest of us sat as well. She was old enough to get her own seat most of the time, but with the way she was squirming today, and the fact that she was leaving soon, made me want to keep a closer eye on her.

Mila gave Diego a tight smile. “I understand, but you do know that’s not true, don’t you?”

“I do.” Diego sounded resigned.

We’d had parts of this conversation before—a big restaurant, a global experience like we wanted to build, wasn’t just about the food. People would be there as much for the name attached to it as anything—my name. Our names.

Dining with us would be an experience. It would be bragging rights. “We’d love to hear more of your thoughts, Mila,” I said.

She held her phone up and the digital shutter clicked as she took several pictures. As she focused on me, I turned Eloise’s face toward my chest and held up a hand. “No. The neighborhood is fine. The food. The construction. But Ellie is off-limits.”

“Oh, of course. I understand.” Mila didn’t hesitate to point the camera in a different direction. “I’m so sorry. People do already know that you’re fathers.”

“That’s fine. Just no pictures of Eloise, and don’t use her name,” Diego said.

Something we both firmly agreed on. She could do that when she was old enough to make the decision for herself, but our daughter wasn't a facility for our success.

The waiter interrupted to take our orders.

"Can I have 'presso?" Eloise asked.

I hid my smile and adopted a stern expression instead. "Not unless we want Ariana to quit."

"No." Eloise pouted.

"You can have a *cornetto*," Diego said.

Eloise clapped. "Yay."

We ordered coffee and pastries for the rest of us, and the waiter left.

With an insistent tug on my sleeve, Eloise drew my attention. "You didn't order anything for Mommy. Isn't she coming to breakfast?"

The game was cute last night, and I definitely didn't mind the honeymoon sex, but it was time for the pretending to stop.

"She had to go home," Diego said before I could correct Eloise. "She'll be back later."

"She's my mommy. She should live here."

Antonio frowned. "Is Isabella in town?"

This needed to stop. "No. It's—"

"My *new* mommy." Eloise talked over me.

I didn't have a reason to yell, but this was one of those instances where pretending wasn't good. "Enough." I made my voice firm. "Last night was make-believe."

“But it was *fun* make-believe. Last night we had dinner at the church, and then I married Carly to Daddy and Daddy, so she’s my new Mommy.”

Antonio’s eyes grew wide. “Carly, the appraiser and project manager from Raphael?”

“It’s almost a shame it wasn’t real,” Mila said. “The two of you finding a new third, being so open with your love... One of those *all publicity is good publicity* things. Plus the pictures on Insta...” She sighed happily.

The frustration on Antonio’s face matched what was building inside me. “It would be a disaster for business. Conflict of interest is never good.” He would know—he’d lost a start-up he built with his best friend because of their indiscretions with a contractor. Then again, the three of them were still together, and he ran the family business...

But I didn’t see this working out the same for me if we let it go on. “Once again, it was a *fake* wedding. We were playing make-believe.” Why wasn’t Diego backing me up? He must feel like I had it under control. “Our six-year-old performed the ceremony, and no one is actually married. We’re not faking being married for headlines.”

“She does have a point about the publicity,” Diego said.

I stared at him in disbelief.

“I won’t post that you’re married,” Mila said. “I get it. Indulge me for just a moment though... What if you let me tell the story of the fake wedding? We’ll make it clear that it wasn’t real. You can give me a tour of the church, I’ll get some photos up on your feeds, and talk about how cute the entire thing is. No photos of Eloise. Just a fun little fluff thing about

how the building is so enchanting, even a pretend wedding has its charm.”

“I like it,” Diego spoke up before I could consider it.

Mila was going to follow all the rules we’d laid out, and this was a good chance to show the place off but still keep the story fun. And really, I didn’t see what it could hurt. “Okay, sure. Let’s do it.”

II

early

MY HOTEL WASN'T what I expected, and I was happy for that. Rather than one of hundreds of rooms shoved into a massive building, it was a little cottage on a street of them, that came with maid service, and a main building with a kitchen, and other services.

I loved it. It would be roomy for this longer stay, and it was quiet when I stepped out onto the back porch in the morning. A little stone path ran through wildflowers growing just a few feet from my door.

It was taking me longer than normal to wake up, and I wasn't used to that. Sure, I'd gone wandering through town in the early hours of the morning, lost in a minor existential crisis, but I should be able to shrug that off and go back to work this morning.

A little coffee and I'd be just fine.

I settled into the giant wicker chair with almost as large a cushion to watch the sun rise. When the warmth hit my face, those first rays of brightness, I closed my eyes and sank into the sensation as the birds chirped around me.

It was like living in my own personal Disney movie, except that the thoughts flitting through my mind were so far

from being G-rated it was almost funny. Last night was incredible. Not just the sex, though I struggled to remember the last time I'd had laugh out loud fun and orgasms in the same night.

The company was good too. The guys. Their little girl.

And of course, the fact that I'd had my first threesome. Something I'd been fantasizing about more and more since both Daria and Brooke had each fallen for two men.

Honestly, I'd expected to be disappointed by the experience. There was so much hype around it, that how could I not be let down?

And I was anything but.

"Of course you loved it, Carly. It was filthy and no strings. Your favorite."

Holy fuck, was the bird talking to me?

There were three of them perched on my table, and a fourth was drinking my coffee.

"Hey." I jerked the mug away. "That's mine."

"Needs more sugar," the robin said.

Why did she look like a cartoon? I was pretty sure birds didn't have lips. Or talk.

And was that one tweeting Halestorm?

Could I get them to do my laundry?

I jerked awake with a start, almost sending myself tumbling out of my chair. As I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, the world was back to normal, and the Carly-is-a-Disney-princess dream was gone.

The fuck was wrong with me?

My phone said I'd slept for nearly an hour. I needed to get ready and meet Diego and Raul soon.

Yup, those memories of last night still filled me with warm fuzzies. I needed to stash that, so we could get work done.

A yawn threatened to split my jaw and my eyelids begged me to let them close again.

Was I dealing with jet lag? That wasn't like me either. But I was struggling to stay awake, and no matter how much half of me willed it, the other half of me refused to get out of this chair.

I forced myself to pick up my phone and call Diego.

"*Ciao.*" His deep voice was like light fingers dancing over me when he answered the phone.

And *God*, the things he could do with those fingers. "Hi. It's Carly. I'm running just a little—" a yawn ambushed me, and I couldn't hold it back "—sorry. I'm running just a little late, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you sound tired," Diego said.

I was. So, so tired. "I'm fine."

"If you want to stay in today and get some more rest, I can make sure operations run smoothly."

"That's ridiculous. Why would I do that?"

"You're dealing with jet lag on top of jet lag." Diego sounded sympathetic. "And being up late."

Was that a dig at my sneaking out?

No. It wasn't as if they wanted me in their house when Eloise woke up.

“They’re just hauling out old appliances today. We’ve got it covered,” Diego said. “I promise neither of us will think less of you if you take the day off.”

Every inch of my body wanted to take his advice, but there was a tiny-but-loud part of my brain that screamed I was slacking if I did this. “I might just sleep for another hour or two, and then I’ll join you guys.”

“If you do, you do, and if not, no worries.”

I thanked him and disconnected.

When I woke up again, the sun had cleared the building and was behind me. I got up long enough to have the kitchen bring me some bread, fruit, and cheese for lunch, and I drifted off inside after I’d eaten.

I dreamed of fae wandering the stone path behind my cabin and sexy men with accents and tattoos who told fairy tales about the magical creatures to adorable little girls who were far too smart for their age. There were spots where I woke up again, but not for long.

The next morning I felt a billion times better. Maybe I’d had some sort of 24-hour bug. I was ready to conquer the world today, though. I reached for my phone and made sure I hadn’t missed anything vital during my mini-Rip-van-Winkle impersonation.

Famous Foodies Find Foreign Love at their Front Door

I started in shock at the side-by-side pictures of Diego and Raul in one image, and me in the other.

What the...?

The first paragraph of the fucking article was background about the guys. Raul’s family, his money, their name and who

they were globally.

The second paragraph was a little about me, though a lot more about my employer.

And it wasn't until paragraph three that it said our wedding had been fake. A game of make-believe with a child performing the pretend ceremony.

Who the fuck read the news all the way to paragraph three? I'd bet there were statistics that said 99 percent of people never read past the headline.

This was bad. This was so bad. It was seven here, so it was eleven at night back home. How many of my colleagues had already seen it? My bosses? If they hadn't yet, it would be waiting for them first thing in the morning.

Even if this wasn't big news for most of the world, Raphael tended to track their clients. A lot of their investments relied as much on public perception as a business plan in order to grow and succeed, so we watched all of our clients.

I needed answers and a solution. I called Diego and there was no answer, so I dialed Raul immediately.

"What is this?" I asked the instant he answered, not giving him a chance to speak.

"This is not what was supposed to happen." Raul didn't ask what I was talking about. "If you're coming over this morning, we can talk through it."

"How about you explain right now, and I decide what the appropriate next steps are?" It wasn't as though I had the ability to pull their funding, but if Kandace didn't like this, she did.

Raul sighed. “It was supposed to be fluff. Fun. It’s supposed to be clear from the start that the wedding was fake.”

“Why was the wedding mentioned at all?” Was it me who was being dim? No. This wasn’t right or normal.

He explained the meeting with Antonio’s social media contact. The discussion. The decision.

I clenched my jaw. “Do you know why Antonio and Justin lost control of their start-up in San Jose?”

“Because they fell in love with their contractor.”

Close, but not quite. “Because the tech sites ran with the gossip about it. No one would’ve cared if the news hadn’t gone public. I’m sure your cousin is good at his job, but he should not be making your social media decisions.” I hadn’t expected to have to be Bad Guy Carly so early in this project, but this was part of what I was here for.

“It wasn’t his decision, it was this person he introduced us to.” Raul’s voice held an edge. “And he is extraordinary at his job.”

And now he thought I’d insulted his family. I’d react the same way if someone said mean things about Jeremy or Megan. I took a deep breath. “It’s done, and the details of how aren’t as important as making sure we fix it and that it doesn’t happen again.”

“Meet us at the church. We’ll talk things through.” Raul was no longer friendly or bright.

Fine. I didn’t need to be swooning over them anyway. This friction was bad, but it would also make it easier for me to keep my distance from both men. “I’ll be there in less than an hour.”

I hurried through a shower, but spent far more time debating what to wear than I should. We were doing demolition today, and I 'd probably help. I didn't have to, my job was to be on site and monitor, but I tended to go hands on. Which meant I should be in jeans, long sleeves, heavier weight clothing I could still work in.

Instead, I wanted a dress. Pretty. Light. Easy access...

Pants it was.

As I was telling myself it was okay I hadn't brought my entire wardrobe of flattering denim, my phone rang.

Lyndsay was our social media manager at The Raphael Group, and if she was calling this late, her time, I had to assume she'd seen the news.

"Hey, girl," I answered brightly.

"Don't give me that." Her tone was light, despite the scolding. "What is this?"

I swallowed the defiant urge to pretend I was clueless about her question. "The wedding stuff?"

"The wedding stuff. If Kandace and the other partners see this, they're going to freak out. They will see it." Lyndsay's job was to help our clients build and maintain a positive public presence. Normally she'd start working with Raul and Diego a month or two from now, as they drew closer to needing more press.

She was going to have to start now, and start with whoever this person was they'd brought on.

"I'm looking into it now," I said. This was what I got for taking a day off yesterday. Stupid, Carly. "I'm meeting with

them this morning to find out how it happened and figure out damage control.”

Lyndsay *tsked*. “No. Get me answers, but I’m on damage control. I’m already spinning something up in my head and I’ll have you details in the next few hours.”

No mention of the fact that she’d be up all night if she did that. And I was on the verge of begging forgiveness for sleeping through it happening in the first place. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. I know you’ve got me on this,” Lyndsay said. “Send over any details when you get them, and I’ll add them to the campaign. Fortunately the truth is buried in the news, so I can pull out the fairytale of the magical church wedding, and we’ll build on that.”

I sighed. “Okay. I’ll keep you updated.”

On the cab ride to the building, I scrolled through the headlines related to my *marriage* to Diego and Raul. The first few, from the bigger outlets, were all the same story over and over. One place had published it and everyone else ran with the same.

The problem with that was that so many places only took the headline and the *about* sections from the original. The more articles I scanned, the fewer mentioned the entire wedding was a kid’s game.

I did find sites with retractions. Brief statements that read *we reported earlier... and we were incorrect*.

That would be the majority of them later, but please let the real news be enough to make people forget the fake.

An email arrived from Lyndsay with the subject line *Hot Takes*.

It was a series of links to social media posts. All of them featuring a version of the wedding headline, and an opinion.

Disgusting.

Woke culture gone wrong.

Beautiful.

Heartwarming.

The world needs more of this.

Two men in a loving relationship, raising a daughter, and they still have enough love to bring a woman into their life. FLOVE.

One of them was just a string of crying emojis that ended with a heart.

At the end, was a note from Lyndsay. *It's almost too bad we have to squash this. Half the world loves the three of you together.*

The words pinged in my chest, though I wasn't sure why.

Yeah, too bad. Thanks for the links, I sent back.

I got to the church, and headed inside toward the kitchen, where we were starting demolition. As I drew closer, the voices that drifted to meet me made my gut fold itself into a pretzel.

Raul and Curtis.

I pasted on my best, most bullshit smile, and rounded the corner to find the two men facing off, Raul wearing a frown and Curtis in a smirk that was pure *I'm going to walk away on top.*

“There she is. The blushing bride.” Curtis’s voice boomed off beams and rafters, and so did the snideness. “No, wait, it’s

not real, is it? Not for you, Temptress.”

My blood turned to ice, my feet froze to the floor, and my mind ground to a halt. Why did he always have this effect on me? Why couldn't I just spit in his face and walk away?

“*Gattina.*” Raul approached me without hesitation. When he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me close, Curtis's eyes grew wide.

But Curtis recovered quickly.

This was not the way to fix misleading headlines, but the last thing I wanted to do was pull away. “Morning.” I managed to keep my voice clear and my expression pasted on.

“You look stunning this morning.” Raul rested a palm on my face and brushed his lips over mine.

This was bad. So, so bad. Not the way to fix any problems at all.

But Curtis's look of shock lingered longer this time, and I wanted so badly to make him choke on *anything* that I was happy to lean into Raul rather than smack him and push him away.

12

diego

I WAS SHOCKED, but pleased, to see Raul and Carly walking toward me with his arm around her waist. As they got closer, she said something I couldn't hear, and he nodded.

They drifted several centimeters apart instantly.

So much for that, but at least I hadn't been hallucinating, I guess?

It was clear to me that Raul had been interested in the chase, and while Carly had been having fun with us, she was more interested in her career.

There was more between us and her, and I was willing to push until we uncovered it. I wasn't even bothered by this morning's headlines, though it was my understanding that Carly was going to *fix* them by burying them. I didn't want that.

I'd pull the three of us together and she'd be ours, and in the meantime I could be disappointed at the friction between Carly and Raul when they weren't flirting or fucking.

When they were close enough, I greeted them with a warm smile, gave Raul a quick kiss, and grasped Carly's fingers. "Feeling better?"

“Sleep-wise? Yes, thank you.” Her pulling away was gentle but clear.

Her entire body was rigid. From Raul?

“Did I miss something?” I asked.

Raul shook his head. “Curtis stopped by to offer his congratulations.”

“And the world thinks the three of us are married.” Carly drove straight to the point.

I was bothered by the Curtis news, especially since he’d been here yesterday, too. After we turned down his proposal, months ago, I’d hoped that would be the last we saw of him. I also hated that Carly was already pushing to clear up the *misunderstanding* about our relationship.

“So, you want to make sure the world knows the three of us aren’t married, but perhaps let Curtis keep believing it?” I pieced some things together based on their posture when I first saw them.

Carly caught her bottom lip between her teeth and frowned. “I mean he’s just...” She finished with a huff.

“He’s an ass,” Raul said. “After what he did to us?”

At the words, Carly jerked her head up. “Wait. What did he do to you?”

Best to tell her now, and make sure we were all on the same page. “Fortunately, nothing.”

She raised her brows.

“But,” I added quickly. “He was pitching us a building idea about the same time we approached the partners at

Raphael. We heard his pitch, we didn't like it, and we turned him down."

"Curtis doesn't like to hear *no*, even if it's something he doesn't want. How did he take the news?" Carly said.

Raul shrugged. "He told us we'd regret the decision and that it didn't matter what kind of connections we had, our restaurant would never be anything without his help."

Curtis's words had seemed carefully picked to imply threat without being a direct threat.

We'd seen them as a threat. "Honestly, we haven't seen him since, until two nights ago. I figured he'd gotten over it, and moved on."

"If he thinks he should have this contract and your business, he hasn't moved on." There was an almost haunted look in Carly's eyes. She shook her head and the expression vanished.

Right. "So, we have to make sure everyone in the world knows our wedding was pretend, except your ex-husband?" I wanted to make sure I had the rules straight.

"That is... The important thing here is that you don't lose your funding." Carly's answer was as diplomatic as anything I'd ever heard.

It also felt intentionally vague for a woman who hadn't had any issues with being direct up until now.

"Lyndsay—our social media guru—is working on a solution," Carly said. "She'll tell us what to do, and until then, we don't touch public platforms. It's easier to fix saying nothing than it is to fix saying the wrong thing."

“Agreed.” It wasn’t as though I had any interest in denying the rumors anyway.

Carly clapped. “Right, then. Let’s get to work.”

Tear down was happening in the kitchen today. We wanted to save as much of the original wood as possible, along with stained glass, and structure. But over time, new walls had been put in, and things had been moved and modified.

For the next few days, we’d remove the old, everything that was going, and make room for renovation and new structure.

Raul and I wanted to be as hands-on as possible during this process. Partly to keep an eye on things, but also because this was our dream. Seeing it grow and evolve would be indescribable. We weren’t allowed to do certain tasks, for insurance and licensing reasons, but for today as long as we followed safety procedures and stayed out of the deconstruction zone, we could help haul debris out to the dumpster.

I was surprised to see Carly grab a pair of heavy gloves, and join in the work. She looked just as sexy with her hair pulled back, a few loose wisps catching her face while she dragged sheetrock out of the building, as she had last night walking home.

It was hard to say why I was so certain Carly belonged in our lives. Sure, I could list things that drew me to her—in addition to being stunning, she was smart, she wasn’t flustered by Raul, and Eloise was drawn to her. But the parts made up a bigger whole, and I *knew* there was more there.

Once I proved it to her, we’d be on our way to happily ever after.

The work crew was tossing the debris into a large pile, and a lot of the pieces needed to be broken down into smaller ones, in order to be removed. We agreed that Carly would help with the breakdown, and Raul and I would take turns wheeling the results out to the dumpster.

Carly tried to argue that she could do that as well, but a test run showed that she wasn't quite tall enough for the task.

I finished emptying the wheelbarrow while Raul and Carly returned to the trash pile to break things down. When I joined them again, Raul was saying something about, "They'd better be ready to pay rent. Oh, and they need to stay out of the important rooms."

Carly swung her sledgehammer into a giant piece of plaster, and made an impressive dent. "You're not zoned for residential."

"I don't assume they're living here. They probably have their own restaurant," Raul said.

I grabbed a scroll saw and took it to one of the beams, temporarily halting the conversation. When I finished I asked, "Who's paying rent?"

"I wanted to know if there are any ghost stories about the buildings around here." Carly loaded chunks of plaster and wire frame into the wheelbarrow.

Raul and I disagreed on whether or not ghosts were real, and each of us was fine with knowing the other was wrong. "Did Raul tell you *no*? Don't listen to him."

"You heard what I told her. If there are any of those bastards here, they'd better not think they get a free ride." With that, Raul grabbed the newly-filled wheelbarrow, and pushed it toward the exit.

“He’s not a believer,” I said to Carly.

“I noticed.” She continued her portion of the demo. “Are you?” Her question was all curiosity and no judgment.

“Absolutely.”

Once again, I had to interrupt the conversation with the saw, and I made my way through all of the current lumber while Raul returned, then left again with another load of trash.

“I don’t know one way or the other,” Carly said. “There are some things that are obviously not real, at least to me, and others I can’t explain. Maybe it’s ghosts, or excess psychic vibes. I didn’t get a straight answer from Raul—are there stories about this place? Lost souls? Apparitions seen in the night?”

I nodded. “A building this old has both energy and lingering ghosts. For the most part they’re quiet. It’s not the kind of activity that brings in tourists or anything. Essentially, we don’t bother them, and they won’t bother us.”

“How do you avoid bothering them when you’re tearing down the walls of their house?” Carly asked.

“I still think they should have to pay rent.” Raul was back.

Carly tossed more waste into the wheelbarrow. “I can think of at least a few partners who’d agree with you.”

I did the same as Carly. “They were here first. It doesn’t seem right to charge them because we moved into their home.”

“But we bring the positive vibes.” When Raul put it that way... I was pretty sure he was just making shit up. “We’re revitalizing *their home*. Making it happy. Cooking good food in it. That’s got to be worth something to these ghosts, right?”

“I don’t think you could call charging them for that *rent*.” Carly paused to drag her arm across her forehead, leaving a white smear of dust.

I wanted to reach up and wipe it away, capture one of those moments where her gaze met mine, our breath caught...

But in the bulky gloves I wore, I’d only make it worse.

“Can we call it a door charge?” Raul asked.

I shook my head and wheeled the next load of trash outside.

I returned to Carly saying, “Ghosts drink free on Thursdays?”

“Tuesday.” Raul was resolute. “Maybe—”

“*Whoa.*” Carly dropped her sledgehammer as she yelled, and pushed past us. “What the fuck?”

At the anger and panic in her voice, I whirled to follow her gaze. The backhoe doing demolition brought its bucket through a load-bearing wall.

“*Stop,*” I shouted at the same time as Carly. My feet were already moving, carrying me in a sprint to the site supervisor. “Shut the demolition down.” I yelled at the top of my lungs.

Marcus, the supervisor, looked at me, unimpressed. “Excuse me?”

“That’s a fucking load bearing wall, and your man just took out the main beam. Shut. It. Down.”

That spurred Marcus into action, and the room erupted in chaos as the crew worked to get a temporary support structure in place.

An hour later, the roof was stable, though our plans weren't.

"Why were we told to tear that wall down, if we weren't supposed to?" Marcus demanded to know.

I stared at him in disbelief. I knew the plans. I'd been involved every step of the way in their creation. "You weren't."

"I was." Marcus yanked his phone from his back pocket, and scrolled to an email from Carly, that said *Updated plans*. "The new blueprint was attached to this."

"No. That wasn't me." Carly sounded as shocked as I felt. "I didn't send you that."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

She glared at me. "Yes, I'm certain I didn't tell the crew to destroy the building. Did you really just ask me that?"

Her offense sounded real, but I was staring at the email that said otherwise.

13

raul

THERE WAS nothing I'd seen in the short time since I'd known Carly that made me think she was incompetent. We'd been told at the start of this project that she was the best at what she did, and I believed it.

So there was no reason to think she'd made a mistake on our contractor instructions—especially one as severe as telling the demolition team to tear down a load-bearing wall.

“Forward me that email,” I said to the contractor.

He did, and it only took me about two seconds of examining it to see that while the message had her name and signature on it, it hadn't come from her email address. It had been spoofed, and not very well.

“This isn't from Carly,” I said.

The contractor glared. “Look, I don't—”

“It doesn't matter.” I didn't need a long-winded excuse. “It looks like it is on the surface, and you didn't know. It's done, and thank Christ we caught it before it was a problem.”

He looked annoyed, rather than relieved. “Great. Want to let us get back to work? This is costing.”

I looked at Diego and Carly.

“We can’t just dismiss that it happened,” Carly said.

Diego nodded. “And it’s not a fluke. Someone went to the effort, only a few days in, of sabotaging something significant. It could’ve drawn out our build time by weeks, and that’s only if it didn’t do serious damage.”

“What are we supposed to do about it?” As she talked, Carly walked up to the jack that was supporting the ceiling. She studied it for a moment before looking back at us.

I could only think of one solution. “We lock down all communication.”

“All orders double checked by us, for each crew, every day before they start.” Carly seemed to know exactly what I meant.

“*That feels excessive,*” the contractor said in Italian, looking at Diego and me. “*You’re going to let her decide that?*”

I swore I heard *an American woman* when he said *her*. “Yes.” My reply came easily, and in English. “Double sign-off on every set of plans, every day. One from Carly, one from Diego or me. Someone went to the effort of spoofing a change request, to have your demo crew wreck our fucking building.” The longer I thought about it, the more pissed off I grew. “In fact, we need the rest of today’s plans, now.”

Diego stepped away to let everyone else we’d be working with know. As Carly and I went through the rest of planned demolition work for the day, I was intently aware of the time ticking away. This was going to grow all of our deadlines, even with us having caught the one issue.

We’d planned to be on-site for some of the work. Were Diego and I going to have to adjust our schedules to have at

least one of us here at all times?

The demo crew was finally cleared to go back to work.

“This is why I’m here,” Carly said, as they started up again.

I stared at her in disbelief. “In case someone tries to sabotage our project?” I wasn’t sure if I was impressed or nervous that our investors built that into their timeline.

Carly’s smile was flat. “To oversee construction. I’m meant to be on-site as much as is needed, so the two of you can get your own work done. We’re investing in *you*. Your idea, your dream. It’s important you can actually work.”

Had she read my mind, to know that was one of my concerns?

Diego was still making phone calls, and I had a different, more personal request for Carly. “I need a favor. Could you not mention the ghosts, that conversation you had with Diego earlier, around Eloise?”

“Of course. Is she scared of them?”

Not quite, and I hated to admit this next bit, even to myself. There was a teensy part of me that believed what I was about to say made Eloise more Diego’s daughter than mine. We didn’t know which of us was her biological father and we’d never wanted to find out. It truly didn’t matter—we were both *Daddy*—but sometimes that little bit of doubt nagged at me. “She has tea with one of them, and I’d rather not encourage that.”

Carly covered her mouth, not hiding her quiet laugh. “Imaginary friend means she’s creative.”

“Not *imaginary*. Not to Diego and Eloise. A spirit from beyond the veil.”

“Right. Okay. I won’t mention it at all around her, I promise.”

“Thank you.”

“So, you don’t believe in ghosts, but you do believe in wolf shifters?” Carly’s tone was playful.

And I had the perfect counter. “Of course. Shifters are real. Diego is descended from a long line of wolves.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Hold that thought.” She walked past me, toward the demolition crew, but stayed at the edge of the work zone, studying them as they went.

I was as captivated by her as them, so it was a good thing she was paying attention. What was it about this woman?

When she returned, she kept half an eye on the work still. “Lupo-Bianchi. The White Wolf. I get it.”

Diego’s last name. “Clever girl.”

Her grin was breathtaking. “Is that why you both hyphenated your names? So you could be a wolf too?”

“I’ll give you the real answer, not the playful one. But we can go back to having fun after if you’d like.”

She laughed. “I appreciate that. On both counts.”

“Yes, I wanted to take his name—who the fuck doesn’t want to be a wolf?” Since I was a kid, I’d been fascinated with all sorts of fierce and mythological creatures. Werewolves, dragons, centaurs... I’d make my mother read me so many stories where they were the heroes. Rather, I’d beg her to make the stories up, since not many existed. “But my name

has weight. I'd be an idiot to ignore that it's opened doors for us."

"You don't strike me as an idiot."

I was almost surprised to hear her say so.

"Though," Carly continued. "You do strike me as someone who wants people to think you're dumber than you are. Does playing the pretty rich boy with more money than brains open doors too?"

"Ouch." I wasn't really offended. It wasn't that I played dumb, but I did work to make sure people felt comfortable around me.

Carly didn't seem to make that a priority. She was like Diego that way, and it might have been one of reasons I was drawn to her.

She shrugged. "Hey, I said you were pretty. Show me that tattoo on your back again and I'll tell you you're fucking sexy."

How did the conversation take this turn? I didn't care as long as we were here. "Will you fall on your knees and worship me?"

"Don't push your luck." Carly licked her lips, despite the words.

"Only every chance I get. Fortune favors the persistent."

"That's not fortune, that's... persistence. Which I'll admit is also sexy."

I could push back. Remind her she didn't care for the persistence on the plane. But I'd rather not risk ruining the moment. "As for believing in wolf shifters, I believe they make incredibly sexy romance heroes."

“You read romance novels.” Disbelief dripped from Carly’s retort.

“I do. The world is full of shitty things, so I want my fiction to have a happily ever after.”

She sighed. “I feel that on a fundamental level. But you’ve found your HEA.”

One of them. I loved Diego with all my heart, and yet, I still had room for one more in there. “I did, and I never take that for granted, because I don’t think most people ever do.”

“Do what?” Speaking of the wolf, Diego was back.

“I don’t think most people find a man as wonderful as you to love for the rest of their lives,” I said.

Diego smirked. “Of course not. No one is as wonderful as me.”

Carly’s laugh was interrupted by her phone ringing. “You two kill me, and I love it. I’ll be right back.” She wandered away, but not before I caught her saying, “Why are you still awake?”

She wasn’t gone long. “That was Lyndsay. She’s going to have a statement in my inbox any second now that will refute the news about us being married. She’s run it by legal, so it needs to be posted exactly the way she sends it to me, though you’re welcome to add text before or after. It needs to go everywhere you have an online presence—personal pages, business, your website... Even if you never use the account, if you have a login, this goes on it.

“We’ll get to it right away.” The sooner we could put that behind us, the better.

“You know, the instant you put that out there, whatever you told Curtis becomes null and void,” Diego said.

What the fuck? I didn't want to have that argument with Diego in front of Carly or the work crew, we always presented a united front in public, but I did need him to ease off this marriage thing.

14

early

I WAS grateful to Raul for *rescuing* me with Curtis, but trying to drag their feet on this fake marriage thing... I was feeling railroaded that the news got out, and now there was a second train boxing me in if they refused to tell their followers it wasn't true.

Diego has a point.

That was an irritating little voice in the back of my head. Did I love rubbing Curtis's nose in anything? Especially the implication that I was not only happy in a relationship, but it was with *two* men who he may have almost as much of a problem with as he did me?

I could play both sides of the rumor. Denounce it publicly but tell Curtis *of course it's real, but we can't let anyone know.*

Which was a stupid, stupid idea. In a book it might work out in the end, with a bunch of silly, embarrassing fumbles along the way, but it wasn't going to work in real life. "Send out the notices," I said with finality. "Every social media account, everywhere you have a presence. This isn't up for negotiation."

I kept an eye on the crew while the guys headed off to do their own work. As I stood at the edge of the kitchen, power

tools roaring around me and dust kicking up into the air, my head swam, and a tick throbbed in my temple. Maybe it was a leftover symptom from all the sleeping I did yesterday.

Downing a lot of water, I kept watching and working.

A short while later, Raul and Diego returned, and we broke for lunch.

The food seemed to help with my dizziness and headache. The lack of jackhammers, and the company from the guys, were pretty good too.

Everyone got back to work, but fortunately my weird head thing stayed at bay. As the clock crept past two, Daria called.

“Hey, you.” I wasn’t used to hearing from her while I was on the road. Not in the middle of the workday like this. Then again, I didn’t make a habit of calling her at three in the morning from the other side of the world, so maybe this was the new normal.

I strolled away a short distance in case this was the kind of conversation that needed to be had in private.

“Have you been kidnapped?” Daria’s question was demanding. “Blink if the answer is *yes*. Wait. I won’t see that. Cough if the answer is *no*.”

What the...? “What are you talking about?”

“The headlines. You. Married. To clients.” And now she was talking in fragmented sentences. This wasn’t quite as surreal as the singing birds from my waking dream the other morning, but it was still weird. “Is that why you called me the other night? You’re in trouble, aren’t you?”

Ah. I coughed. “That’s the signal for *no* isn’t it? I’m fine, I promise.” I looked up to see Raul watching me, curious

amusement on his face.

Good, let him wonder.

“I don’t know...” Daria’s sigh was heavy. “I’m not sure I believe you.”

It was six her time, so she probably hadn’t gotten into work email or any details. “Have you read any of the longer articles? The wedding wasn’t real. It was a kid’s game.”

“The longer articles aren’t the ones trending. You got married because of a kid’s game? Like Candy Land the Ball and Chain Edition?”

I snorted. “I didn’t get married. They have a daughter—”

“Too. Adorable. Is she adorable? Wait, I don’t want you to answer that. Do they think she’s adorable?”

“They’re her fathers, of course they do. But yes, she is.”

“Blink if you’ve been kidnapped.”

I couldn’t stop laughing. “Knock it off. Do you want to hear my story or just make up your own?”

“The one in my head is probably better,” Daria said.

I rolled my eyes. “I assume that’s true. But here’s the truth—their little girl wanted to play pretend wedding, and I was available. The story that was *supposed* to run would’ve been about how whimsical this church is, and it inspires all ages to play make-believe.”

“The feminist in me is bothered that the default make-believe was *wedding* and the mom in me knows that Harmony would’ve done the same. Do you promise you’re all right?” Daria stopped teasing long enough to sound genuinely concerned.

It was sweet of her, but unnecessary. “*Fuck*. Yes. I promise I’m fine.”

“Okay. When Brooke calls, if you tell her a different story, I’ll know.”

I shook my head. “Thanks for the heads up.” We said our *goodbyes* and I disconnected. Rather than rejoining the guys, I waited. If this was how Daria reacted, I needed to make sure I told Megan none of this was real before she found the news on her own. She’d probably send Nigel after me, to make sure he took care of whoever was holding me against my will.

Just a few minutes later, Brooke called. “Daria told me you’d been kidnapped.”

“I haven’t.”

“Is Italy pretty?” Brooke and I hadn’t been friends long, but I adored her. It did mean she didn’t know my habits as well as Daria. In this case, that appeared to be a good thing.

“It gets more gorgeous every time I’m here. Wanna see?” I asked.

“Of course.”

Diego and Raul were currently focused on the demolition crew. I snapped a picture with them in the foreground and a stained-glass wall in the background, and sent it to Brooke.

“Wow.” Her awe was tangible. “My view is better, but I love the stained glass.”

Agree to disagree. Brooke’s boyfriends were pretty, but Diego and Raul were fucking sexy. Besides, the closest Adam got to an accent was a fake southern drawl when he was doing his Matthew McConaughey impersonation. “You’re biased,” I

said. “Next time Daria calls and tells you I’ve been kidnapped, tell her I’m fine.”

“Will do. Talk soon.”

“What was that?” Diego’s question startled me. I didn’t realize he’d joined me.

It was fun, but it was also ridiculous, that was what it was. “Friends who know me too well. What’s up?”

“I’ve been thinking about how I want to change things up in the kitchen, to account for the demolition mistake,” he said. “Nothing big, but I’d like to run my ideas by you and Raul. Eloise is at his parents’ for the night. Will you stay an extra hour or two and talk through this with us?”

Working late with the men I’d slept with just a few nights ago? With the guys the world thought I was married to?

That seemed like a bad idea.

Then again, I was here to work with and for them, so turning him down seemed stupid.

“We’re staying here, if that helps your decision at all. Strictly professional,” Diego said.

That was a smidge disappointing, but it was for the best. “Sure. I can stay.”

Nothing would happen. I wouldn’t let anything happen. I didn’t want anything to happen.

Except, if I had all of that tattooed on my forehead, I still wouldn’t believe that was the way I wanted things to go.

diego

I DIDN'T WANT to tell the world that the marriage to Carly was fake.

I *wanted* to keep her around, get to know her better, and convince her she was meant to be part of us. There was no way to explain how I knew, or why I didn't want to let the notion go. The feeling was what it was, and there was no way to put words to it beyond that.

Did I realize that made me sound like an obsessive, psycho stalker? Yes. Which was why I was keeping the thought to myself.

I'd had the same feeling about Isabella, and while it was true, she broke our hearts and abandoned Eloise, and I couldn't fathom or forgive that... She'd also been a huge part of bringing Eloise into our lives.

So I'd be cautious with Carly. Curb most of the impulses. Watch and wait.

That resolution wouldn't stop me from enjoying her company though. Especially as she pored over blueprints with Raul and me. Her hair was pulled into a high and messy ponytail, and when she was deep in thought, her tongue caught

between her front teeth, sticking out just enough to be adorably playful.

Raul was captivated too, even if he didn't realize how much, and his attention was captured in a different way.

"We're set then," I said.

Carly straightened up and blew up a puff of air, to clear a strand of hair from her forehead. "We are. I'll have the office update the files, and by the time everyone gets in tomorrow morning, we should be set." She used her phone to snap photos and take scans.

This meant the night was almost over, and far earlier than I'd expected. Time to change that. "Let's do dinner, to celebrate."

Carly raised her brows. "To celebrate... almost having the kitchen come down on us?"

"To celebrate not only stopping that from happening, but finding a solution quickly." Raul may not be on the *we need Carly in our life long-term* train with me yet, but he was still letting his libido steer at least a little.

The way Carly shook her head wasn't encouraging. "We don't have a kitchen, how are we going to cook?"

"This may surprise you," I said playfully, "but we have this thing here where we can call restaurants and they deliver food to us." We could also go out, but I'd rather keep the party private. Intimate.

Carly laughed. "Really? Food delivery? Whatever will they think of next?" Her shock was so exaggerated, they probably heard it in Sicily. "All right, I'm sold. I'll even agree it's a celebration, though I'd like to propose instead of

celebrating not failing, we make it about the fact that the two of you broke ground on your dream today.”

That sounded like the perfect thing to celebrate. “I love it.” I set about gathering the blueprints rolled out over the large wooden table we’d set up at the edge of the kitchen.

“I know the perfect thing. I’ll give them a call.” Raul already had his phone out.

Carly looked between us, lips pursed. “I’ll... sit here and look pretty?”

Responding to that felt like a trap, especially with the grief she’d given Raul for all of his cheesy pick-up lines. I was wavering on a reply when a clap of thunder rattled the windows.

Carly’s amusement wilted, and when it came back, her smile looked forced. She hadn’t liked the storm at the airport either. Was it all storms or was there something specific she didn’t care for?

“Are you all right?” I asked.

Like that, all emotion vanished from her face. “Totally good.”

The next crack of thunder was further away, and some of the tension drained from Carly’s body. A third was barely audible, and her easy smile was back.

Totally good. Sure.

Raul finished making his call and pocketed his phone. “The food will be here in just a few minutes.”

“In the meantime, I secured us a centerpiece for our meal.” I gestured at Carly, who sat perched on her stool still.

Pink tinged her cheeks.

Raul made a show of dragging his gaze over her. “We could skip dinner.”

“Uh, no. We couldn’t.” Despite the words, Carly didn’t look upset. “Because I’m hungry for *food*.”

“Pft.” Raul waved a dismissive hand. “Food is overrated.”

“Says the chef who promised his restaurant would make us millions.” Carly seemed to have recovered completely from the thunder spooking her.

A drop of water hit my cheek, and I frowned. That wasn’t right. Another followed.

Carly wiped her hand across her cheek. “What the...?” She looked up.

The sound of heavy raindrops hit the roof, and little splashes of wet splattered all around us.

“The roof is leaking.” I was already moving toward the ladders and scaffolding from the construction crew, with Raul and Carly hot on my heels.

“Help me move the scaffolding over here,” I barked the order at Raul. He’d understand both my tone and urgency. So would Carly. “Grab the plastic—” tarps, and something to secure them. I didn’t have to finish the command; she was already on it.

None of the individual leaks were severe. A drop here and there. But they were spread at random widths across the ceiling, and I needed to make sure that we stopped the dripping and that the structure itself didn’t look like it was in danger of collapsing.

Raul and I were used to working together without much conversation. When a task needed to be done, especially in an emergency, we tended to each know what the other needed. In this case, it was to make a plastic barricade, and direct any water coming in to buckets at the edge of the room.

Adding Carly to the mix should've been stressful, but she fit in like a missing puzzle piece.

As we worked, our delivery arrived. It would've been better fresh, but now was hardly the time to care about that. After making sure we didn't need help, the guy left our food on the table and left us to work.

The entire process took more than an hour of climbing, securing, and rearranging, but when we were done, I was confident our floors would survive the night without being waterlogged, and our roof would survive the storm.

When we sat at the table again, my limbs were weary, but nervous energy thrummed under my skin, and I couldn't stop bouncing my leg. "Thank you," I said to Carly. "You didn't have to chip in like that."

"I did, though."

"Have to protect the boss's investment?" Raul's joke was weak.

So was Carly's laugh. "That too. But mostly I had to save this gorgeous old building, and, well, your dreams. And it helped distract me." The last part was said softly. "Anyway, what is this?"

"See for yourself." I helped Raul lay out the spread of food. There was fresh bread, prosciutto, and an assortment of soft and hard cheeses. "It's all supposed to go on the bread

right after the bread comes out of the oven, so the heat melts everything just a little.”

“It looks incredible, regardless,” Carly said.

For a few minutes, we were all focused on building our own sandwiches and eating. The edge from the panic had faded from my system, and I relaxed quickly. “May I ask what it is you don’t like about storms?” I looked at Carly.

She made a muffled chuckle-sigh through her mouthful of sandwich, and didn’t seem to be in any hurry to finish chewing. “I love the rain. A heavy downpour, a drizzle, gray and cold, warm and wet... I could spend hours in the rain.” This time her sigh was more obvious. “When I’m home. My home. A familiar place that I know my family is nearby.”

Close to family was a sentiment I understood, but I was fortunate that I was rarely far from mine. “If you don’t want to get into it, forget I asked.” I meant it.

“No, it’s okay. You’ve both met Curtis and you seem to have a good understanding of who he is, so you might appreciate the story more than most people.”

“You mean he gets worse?” Raul didn’t sound surprised.

Carly’s smile was thin. “Only if you piss him off. Or inconvenience him. Or he didn’t have enough coffee for the day. Or...” She gave her head a quick shake. “Besides, I don’t invite men back to my room at strange airports every... ever, so I feel like I should explain that, too.”

I had been curious, but so much had happened since then, that question had been pushed to the back of my mind. “We’re listening.”

Carly took another big bite of her sandwich—was it strange that I appreciated she didn’t seem to have any issues

eating in front of us? It was one of those small things that also made her that much more genuine. She washed the food down with drink, and dropped her hands onto the table with a heavy *thud*.

“Right after Curtis and I got married, he moved us to Logan—that’s about two hours North of Salt Lake—so he could do his post grad work at Utah State. The weather’s a little harsher there, and we hadn’t been there for long when the first blizzard hit. He was working graveyards, I was home alone, and I got sick.”

That had to be rough. I hated to think of Raul or Eloise being alone when they were ill.

“It wasn’t a big deal at first. An hour or so after he left, the snow hit and so did my pain and nausea.” Carly drew in a deep breath and moved her hand to her right side. “I went to bed, figuring it would pass, and woke up a few hours later to more than two feet of snow, and the most intense pain I’d ever felt.” Her wince was the kind of ghost of a memory that I felt in my bones.

“I fluctuated between fever dreams and curling up in a ball and sobbing. We only had the one car, so I was stuck at home, we hadn’t had a landline installed yet, and my cell phone reception was shit. On top of that, I didn’t know anyone in town yet.” She looked pained, and I wanted to wrap her up and comfort her.

I settled for reaching across the table, and covering her hand.

Carly’s smile was sad, but she didn’t pull away. “Curtis didn’t come home when he was supposed to. Or an hour later, or three. Fever dreams plus panic equal some fascinating explorations into the psyche.” She dragged in a deep breath,

and swallowed hard. “When I finally got my phone to work, no one at Curtis’s work was picking up, so I called my sister, Megan. She ordered me to go pound on neighbors’ doors until I found someone who could take me to the hospital.

“I found a woman about my age, who was only a few doors down. Daria still couldn’t leave until the roads had been plowed, but fortunately that didn’t take long. At the emergency room, I found out that my appendix had burst, and they implied I was lucky I got there when I did.”

I didn’t want to ask, and add to the bad memories, but I had to know. “What about Curtis?”

“Daria kept calling him—this woman I didn’t know at all—until he finally picked up. He said he’d been waiting at work for the roads to clear and didn’t think it would matter because I should’ve been asleep. He apologized profusely when he got to the hospital, but he also made sure they released me as soon as they could, and expected me to be back on my feet the next day.

“Megan came to stay with me for the next few weeks, to take care of me. She and Curtis fought all the time.” Carly sighed. “I know it wasn’t the storm’s fault, but I hate to be away from home during any storm that shuts down an entire city.”

“You never have to worry about that with us.” Maybe I shouldn’t have said that, but I needed Carly to know she was safe when she was around. The compulsion was so potent, it nearly overwhelmed me.

raul

CARLY'S STORY broke my heart and infuriated me on her behalf. I didn't need more reasons to dislike Curtis, but I'd certainly found them. And when Diego reassured her that she was never alone with us, I couldn't agree more.

Her smile and her, "Thank you," were the bright spot of the story. "I feel a little exposed after that."

"We've seen you naked." I could've been more reassuring, couldn't I?

But her grin was brighter than it had been. "This is different, and I've seen you naked too."

"Do you want to hear our story?" Diego asked.

What was he doing? I didn't want to get into that. I didn't have issues with the Diego part of things, or where we were now, with Eloise, but there were parts of our *origin story* that I never liked reliving.

"As an overall question? Of course. I love a good story," Carly said. "In response to me spilling my guts about a night that scarred me"—her hand fell to her right side again—"both physically and emotionally? Possibly not."

"We don't know which of us is Eloise's father." Why did I say that? I shouldn't have said that.

Carly tilted her head to the side and studied me. “Both of you.” There was no hesitation in her response. “I’ve seen you with her. There’s no question that you’re both *Dad*.”

I liked her. From the start regardless, but I swore almost every time Carly opened her mouth, I liked something new about her. “When we met her mother, Isabella, it was pretty close to love at first sight.”

“For me.” Diego had almost always worn his heart on his sleeve. “Raul needed convincing.”

A shadow passed over Carly’s face. “Ah. Okay.”

I had no idea what that meant, and I didn’t know how to ask. “All three of us did the whole courtship thing. Dated. Fell in love. Talked about the three of us starting a family. You know, standard stuff.” This was usually where people said *except for the three people falling in love thing, sure*.

Carly just said, “Sure. I get that.” Her tone was unreadable.

“You do?” This time I couldn’t hide my surprise.

She shrugged. “My brother and sister are both in triad relationships. And both happier than I’ve ever seen them. So, yeah, I get that.”

I was almost positive I just heard Diego get a heart-on. I was telling a story, though. “We all agreed we wanted to start a family. We had so many conversations around it, because it was important to us we didn’t bring a life into this world who wouldn’t be loved.” My family was everything to me, but Diego’s blood relatives hadn’t left him with great memories. Those were his stories to tell, though.

“I can tell you succeeded.” Whatever had clouded Carly’s mood had lifted again. “It’s clear watching the two of you with Eloise...”

“Except, it was a problem with Isabella.” I hated this part of the story, but Carly had exposed herself and it felt fair to do the same. Besides, I wanted—needed—her to know. What Bella did to us... No one else would ever have that chance to hurt Eloise that way.

Diego squeezed my knee. “We don’t know if it was postpartum depression or if Isabella had lied about wanting a kid or if she just changed her mind.”

How could someone do this to their own baby? To our Eloise? How could someone leave such a perfect soul behind? It haunted me that I didn’t have an answer. “She left in the middle of the night. Her note said she wanted other things in life, and we never heard from her again.”

“I’m so sorry.” Carly sounded somber.

“And now we’re naked in front of you, too,” Diego said.

The mood was ruined. Not that there had been much of one after the leaks. What a night. “When did you fall in love with Milan?” I didn’t want to end this evening on a down note. We’d started off having fun, and I’d rather add some good new memories than wallow in old, bad ones.

Carly looked surprised at my question. “I never said...”

“You did on the plane.”

We had finished dinner, and I made quick work of gathering everything up, and setting it aside to throw out.

“I guess I did.” Some of the tension seemed to drain from Carly. “I don’t think I can pinpoint an exact moment where I said *I love it here*. It was more of a slow-burn, you know? Knowing that the perfect restaurant was always there when I was in the mood. The perfect wine. The perfect old church with flying buttresses, five-hundred-year-old stained glass, and

the kind of altar that made me want to do wicked, blasphemous things on it. And one day I realized this city captivated me like no other, and that it had for a while.”

“It does do that,” Diego said.

I was hung up on a different part of her reply and was about to do something that would either backfire on me, or build some unique memories. Probably the former. I was willing to risk it. “Wicked, blasphemous things on the altar?”

“Ah. You caught that.” Pink flooded her cheeks, and she ducked her head. “Terribly wicked.”

“Wicked enough to help us forget the bad parts of our pasts for a little while?” This was reckless in so many ways, and I was finding it hard to remember any of them. Further proof that we needed to mute the echoes.

Carly met my gaze. “Depends on how good you are.”

“Absolutely not at all.” Not tonight. We were talking about wickedness, after all. “But we give as well as you do.” I stood, moved to stand next to Carly, and tugged her to her feet. Dipping my head near her ear, I whispered, “If we make you our sacrifice, will you scream our names in worship?”

She pulled away with a smirk. “God, yes.”

Diego watched us, surprised. “Did I miss something?”

“The moderate need to mask pain with sex?” Carly said.

On the plane, I hadn’t been sure what to think of her bluntness. It was growing on me, and possibly infecting me. “What she said.”

A faint frown crossed Diego’s face. “I’m trying to decide... If I want the same, but for different reasons, is it okay?”

“Well,” I moved closer to him, until we were toe-to-toe, and linked my hands at the back of his neck. “Do you want to say no?”

“Not really.” The way his reply rumbled through me... the familiar scent of his cologne... his heat as his frame pressed into mine... It was all familiar comfort, and at the same time, seductive intoxication.

I crushed my mouth to his, sinking into the purity of Diego’s soul. Devouring his moan and relishing the connection between us. I didn’t let him go when we broke the kiss. “Sounds to me like a good reason to say yes.”

“So I probably shouldn’t be the one to point this out.” Diego clucked. “But I’m going to anyway. The altar is not a good size for having sex on.”

“Boo.” Carly’s pout was adorable. “Do you think they planned it that way on purpose?”

Grabbing her hand, I tugged her to us. “Probably. I’m sure they specifically had spoiling our fun in mind when they designed it.” I rested my hands on her hips, and when I spun her, she squealed. That sound would never get old. I guided her back to the table. “Fortunately we’re good at modifying the original plans when the situation requires.”

The oak table was more than sturdy enough for what we had in mind, and it didn’t so much as wiggle when Carly sat on it.

“What happened to just this once?” In contrast to her question, she wrapped her legs around mine and tugged me closer.

Diego brushed her hair from her neck and glided his mouth along the curve. “We’re adapting. Also, this was your idea—

the two of you.”

“And you’re such an unwilling participant?” Carly leaned into his kisses.

“I never said that. In fact, I am positive I said the opposite.” Diego gripped her hair and tugged, as if to emphasize his words.

I traced the knuckle side of my finger down Carly’s front, barely making contact. Hesitation flashed through me, and the thoughts didn’t make any sense. What if this was the last time we got this? Of course it was, we just agreed. What if she was like Isabella? She wasn’t, because Diego and I didn’t plan to make her a long-term part of our lives.

What if we didn’t get to keep her?

Rather than dwelling on the ridiculously obvious, I rested my hand on Carly’s face, stole her from Diego’s kisses, and crushed my mouth to hers. She grunted against my kiss and fisted my shirt in her hands. This was the kind of physical that drove straight to my cock. I pressed into her heat, letting her feel my erection, grinding my hips until it ached.

Better than feeling the ache in my chest. Which wasn’t there.

Wrapping her legs tighter around me, Carly held me close, as if I was her lifeline. “I need right now to be the only thing that matters.” Her murmur against my mouth was so soft, I wasn’t sure Diego heard it.

But I did. Loudly. Distinctly. I heard it and I felt it in my core. “Your wish is my command.”

The three of us fell into kiss after kiss, with Diego letting me taste his mouth before he moved to Carly, then I stole him back again. She never released me, and the way her body

molded to mine was delectable. Especially watching her cup Diego and stroke his erection through his jeans.

He nipped a row of light bites down her neck, while I kneaded her breasts through her top. I was so hard it hurt, and grinding against Carly threatened to rub a hole in my dick.

I gripped her chin and forced her gaze to mine. “I need to bury myself in you.”

“God, I need that too.” Her desperation was contagious. Or maybe mine had consumed her as well.

I untangled myself enough to drop onto the bench that ran the length of the table, and Carly dropped to her feet next to me. I undid her jeans with clumsy fingers. Diego pushed her bottoms to the ground, grunting in frustration when her pants got caught on her shoes.

Carly’s giggle was delicate. Sweet. Caramel sauce on a budino. “And to think, I almost wore a skirt today.”

“To a worksite?” Diego sounded surprised.

I wasn’t.

“To see the two men I had so much fun fucking a few nights ago.”

I suspected the words were coming, though maybe not so bluntly, but her answer made me harder regardless. I unzipped my pants, kicked aside my own shoes, and stripped off everything from the waist down. Wait. Condom. Wallet. That was important.

Straddling the bench, I reached for Carly. She pressed a palm to my chest and pushed me back, until I caught myself on my elbows. There wasn’t room for this here, and I didn’t

care. She felt incredible hovering over me. Lowering herself onto my cock. Her pussy wrapping around me.

Her hair was mussed, her face was flushed, and she was extra slick and tight. I was pretty sure this was heaven, and if this angel riding me moved, I was going to come in a blink.

Diego had shed his trousers and some point and now moved behind Carly. “Lean into him.” He settled a hand on her back and nudged.

“What are you doing?” She glanced back, but obeyed.

“Joining in the fun. I want to be inside you too. I want to be pressed up against Raul as I do it.” Diego’s fingers teased my shaft when he slipped them inside Carly, as if to demonstrate his intent.

Her laugh turned nervous. “I, uh... I don’t know that you’re going to fit.”

“We’ll take it slowly.” Diego pressed his lips to the hollow behind her ear. “If it’s too much, I’ll stop.”

Carly nodded.

Staying still while Diego used his fingers to stretch Carly out was torture, but it was better than finishing too soon. When he eased himself into her, his cock pressing into mine, I moved my focus to Carly’s breasts again. Every time I pinched her nipples she made the most delicious sounds, and the play seemed to distract her and make her slicker at the same time.

With every inch that Diego slid deeper, my cock twitched in response. Carly’s groans were half-pain, half-pleasure.

“Are you still okay?” He asked.

She nodded, and licked her lips. “Yes. Better than okay. Keep going.”

I'd always loved this sensation—being wrapped inside a pussy with Diego joining me—but with Carly it was more intense for some reason. Better.

When Diego was all the way inside her, the three of us sat still for a moment, acclimating.

“What happens now?” Carly asked.

I pulled her closer to me, to steal a kiss and give her nipple another pinch. Sometimes actions were far better than words.

Diego pressed his fingers to her clit, brushing my skin in the process. The way she clenched around us... fuck me. We rocked inside her and against each other, slowly and deliberately, while Diego stroked her swollen button. He increased the pace against her clit with her groans.

The build-up was excruciating in the best way. Her body twitched against our intrusion. Clenched. Spasmed. And when she cried out in pleasure, I felt it. The sensation of her orgasm started in my dick and yanked an invisible cord that ran to every point in my body.

Diego and I were in sync—neither of us needed to say a word to know there was no reason to hold back. While Carly was at the height of her climax, I picked up the pace. Moving fast, fucking harder. As much as was possible in this position.

I lost myself in the sensations. The sounds both of them made... Carly's hands on my chest... The way she dug in... Her nipples pressing into my palms even through fabric. And of Diego slipping with me and against me.

My pleasure built more slowly than if I were inside her alone, but when my balls tightened, it was still too soon. I wanted this to last.

I couldn't, though. When I came, it was hard, intense, and enough to transport an entire galaxy to sparkle in my vision. Diego's grunts said he was consumed by ecstasy as well, and coming hard. His deep grunts and groans were loud. All-consuming.

As the feeling ebbed, after I emptied myself, silence sank into the room. The world paused as the three of us stayed connected—sated—and grasped for our breath.

“How is it that the two of you chase my demons away, in real life and in my head?” Carly's question was quiet.

“I could say the same about you.” I hadn't realized how true that was until the words passed my lips. She stilled parts of my mind I couldn't silence on my own. That even Diego couldn't keep at bay.

Diego kissed the back of her neck. “Come home with us tonight.”

“Okay.” Her answer surprised me.

It was a bad idea to keep doing this, but I didn't want to fight the pull to her. Not right now.

early

I SHOULDN'T HAVE GONE HOME with Raul and Diego, but their place was close, and they were safe and warm...

In the morning, I woke up to them talking in hushed, strained voices, a few feet from the bed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Diego looked up, startled, but his expression softened quickly. "Ariana has food poisoning, and can't take Eloise. Everyone else's schedules are full too. We're trying to decide which one of us will stay home with her."

I couldn't have that. Raul and Diego both needed to be on-site today for different reasons.

"I can stay here with her." Whoa. What was I doing? I'd like to be on-site as well, but I didn't need to be. Any work I had could technically be done from anywhere. That didn't mean I should babysit.

"We can't ask you to do that," Raul said.

This was where I should say *you're right. You should stay. We can shift your schedule.* "You didn't. I volunteered." Apparently I was determined to do this. "You both need to be there, I don't. And I've watched kids before. I promise they've

all come out of the experience with their fingers and toes intact.”

“Not exactly a screaming recommendation.” The way Raul raised an eyebrow said he didn’t find the same humor in my words that I did.

“Do you want my references?” Now I felt like I had to defend myself. So I could do a job I shouldn’t have volunteered for in the first place. “You’ve talked to Daria before. She trusts me with her children.”

Diego shrugged and glanced at Raul. “Pretty sure Daria doesn’t even trust people to borrow a pen, so that seems like a good reference.”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind.” Bless Raul for giving me one last chance to back out.

“I don’t.” And damn me. “Leave me with any instructions I need. Allergies, screen time, all of it. Eloise and I will have fun.”

Diego’s smile of relief was worth my offer. The soft expression that crossed his handsome, chiseled face. “Thank you.”

Before Eloise got home, I borrowed clothes from Raul, rather than taking the time to go back to my own place and change. His T-shirt was too big, and I had to tie the sweatpants up tightly and roll up the ankles, but it was oddly comforting to be wrapped in something that belonged to him, and it would keep me modest and ready for my day of childcare.

Raul’s mother came in with Eloise, handed the girl’s bag to Raul, and exchanged hugs with him and Diego. She said several things rapidly in Italian that I didn’t catch, including pointing at me more than once, and Raul replied in kind.

There. That was my name. I understood that one word. As Raul said it, he gestured to me. I understood his introduction, at least that was something, so I summoned a warm smile and offered my hand.

She clasped it warmly between both of hers, and fired off another short string of Italian.

I looked to Raul for a translation, but all I got was him blushing.

“She wants to know if you’re the new *mommy* Eloise was talking about,” Diego supplied.

Raul responded to his mother, and I caught the word *fingere* —pretend—in reply.

She shook her head and patted the back of my hand, before saying something else.

Raul rolled his eyes. “She says it’s a shame it’s not real. You’d make a good mother.”

I most certainly would not. I kept the thought to myself, and just kept smiling.

“I did tell her to leave you alone. You’re a business contact,” Raul said.

All without me prompting. Good. Perfect. Fantastic.

Raul exchanged a few more words with his mother, gave her a hug, and sent her on her way. A short while later, he and Diego were ready to leave.

As they were walking out the door, I called out one more reminder. “Don’t forget to post the retraction-slash-clarification about the wedding today.”

“I’ve got it. Promise,” Diego said, and they were gone.

And I was alone with their six-year-old, and had no clue what to do first.

“Why are you wearing Daddy’s shirt?” Eloise tugged on the hem of said garment.

Well, *fuck*. That went downhill fast. “My own shirt got dirty, and he loaned me something so I could stay here with you, instead of having to go back to my hotel.” That was as close to the truth as could be.

Eloise shrugged. “Okay.”

My meetings with the people back home wouldn’t be until later today, so I would spend one-on-one time with Eloise this morning and give her Dad-approved screen time this afternoon during my calls. “What do you want to do first?” I asked. “Do you need breakfast?”

“Nonna fed me.”

“Do you want to color?” That should be an easy *yes*. Harmony loved to color, so I assumed all six-year-olds did.

Eloise shook her head.

“Do you want to play dolls?” I was rapidly running out of ideas.

“I want to make buildings, like Daddy does.”

Okay. I could do that. “Make them out of what?”

“Legos.”

“Lead the way.”

Eloise pulled me into her bedroom, told me which big buckets to drag out of the closet, and dumped piles of bricks on the floor. “Take those and put them together.”

I did as I was instructed, and she scowled.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Not like that.” She huffed and crossed her arms. “Fine. I’ll do it myself.” Her gruff voice and exasperation reminded me of Diego. It seemed she’d been watching him work.

Eloise grabbed all new bricks and started to build. Occasionally she would give me instructions, but it seemed I wasn’t up to her high-quality standards. The structure she created wasn’t quite as structurally sound as I would require from my clients.

I didn’t correct her. There was no reason to stunt her creativity. As she built, I saw Diego’s influence in the uniformity of the design, and Raul’s in the pieces of flair she added to the exterior. And it was all wrapped in this adorable little package of sunshine and joy.

As we moved past noon, and toward two, Eloise announced that I would be making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch.

Good. I could do that. With a little luck, Raul hadn’t set too high a bar there. We headed into the kitchen. I grabbed the ingredients, put peanut butter on one slice of bread, jelly on another, and squished them together.

“No,” Eloise said. “Not like that. That’s not how Ariana makes it.”

It mattered? That was fine—I’d eat this one. “How does she do it?”

“Jelly first, then peanut butter on top.”

That sounded messy and grossly inefficient, but the girl needed to eat. I applied the ingredients as instructed. As I put the second piece of bread on top, Eloise said, “Not the purple jelly, the orange.”

Seriously? Fine. More leftovers for me.

I grabbed the marmalade out of the fridge. “This one?”

“Yes.”

Good. We were back in business. I made sandwich number three, in the exact order I was supposed to. As I was finishing up, my phone rang. “Do you want to go watch TV, and I’ll cut your sandwich and bring it to you?” Please don’t let that be a violation of some *we only eat in the dining room* rule.

“Okay.” Eloise hopped from her seat and ran into the living room.

Perfect. Because Kandace was on the phone. “Ciao,” I answered. “What has you up so early?”

“I’m still seeing that this news story of you being married to my clients is out there.” Straight to the point.

One of the things I liked about Kandace. I cut Eloise’s sandwich vertically— a straight line top to bottom. “Diego promised me he’d post the copy Lyndsay wrote him. It should’ve been up there this morning, but they’ve also been in meetings.”

Great, now I was making excuses for them. The opposite of my job.

“This has to get fixed,” Kandace said. “I know you know that, but...”

I cradled the phone between my shoulder and ear, grabbed the plate, and walked into the living room. “I’m not their babysitter.” I’d said that about dozens of clients, but I knew better. I just wished it hadn’t come to that with these two.

I set the sandwich in front of Eloise.

She screamed so loudly I nearly dropped the phone, and then she started to cry.

“Are you someone’s babysitter?” Kandace’s tone turned concerned in an instant.

“Fu—dge. I’m sorry. Please don’t cry, sweetie,” I said to Eloise. “Not you,” I said to Kandace. “What’s wrong?” Back to Eloise.

“You cut it wrong, and it’s ruined.” Eloise’s wail was earsplitting.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Lucas was a picky eater too.” Apparently Kandace was still on the line. “Never tell him I told you that.” The screaming almost drowned her out.

“Please don’t cry, Ellie. I’ll fix it, I promise.” How was I supposed to get her to stop?

“Take her into the kitchen with you,” Kandace said as if reading my thoughts. “Have her give you every single step to make the sandwich. Assume nothing. Don’t stop until she’s eating.”

Didn’t we just do that? But I’d had finicky clients before, I knew better. “Okay. But I need to call you back.”

“I’ll be here.” Kandace disconnected.

I put down the phone and scooped Eloise into my arms. Her crying stopped in a blink. I carried her into the kitchen, set her on the counter long enough to wash the tears from her cheeks and make her blow her nose, and then put her in her chair.

“Can I call you Ellie like your daddy does?” If I was doing everything one step at a time, I might as well start there.

Eloise sniffled and nodded.

“Okay, Ellie. As you can see, I’m not very good at making sandwiches. I need you to tell me how, okay?”

“Ariana knows how.”

Holy fuck.

But still better than working with a stubborn client. “Ariana is sick today, and I want to learn so I can do it right. Can you teach me?”

Eloise’s scowl was etched deep, and she looked like an angry pixie. But she relented and walked me through the sandwich making process. When she was in front of the TV, eating and watching people in colorful costumes sing and dance, I called Kandace back.

“I’m so sorry about that,” I said as soon as she answered.

“Should I ask why you have a literal child screaming at you?”

As opposed to the figurative children who usually screamed at me. “Because I am a babysitter.” Despite my saying otherwise just a few minutes ago. “Raul and Diego needed someone to watch their little girl so they could work.”

“That’s going above and beyond for the job.”

“When in Rome?”

Kandace laugh-sighed. “Pretty sure that’s not what that saying means. Don’t take this personally, but... You’re not sleeping with one of them, are you?”

“*What?* No.” God, was that too much? Not enough? Suddenly I had no idea what genuine denial sounded like. But it was true—I wasn’t sleeping with *one* of them.

“Okay. I’m sorry.” Kandace rarely apologized. “Given the situation, I had to ask.”

“The situation?”

“That a large part of the world thinks you married the men I just invested in?”

Oh. *That* situation. “Right. Duh. Is Mom Brain a valid excuse?”

“Not after five hours. Give it at least a few months.” Kandace chuckled.

We were back to a lighter tone. Good. Great. “Diego promised me he’d post it today. I’ll send him a text now and remind him, and nag him until it’s done.” My job. I’d do my job. I wouldn’t let rumors reflect poorly on my employer.

“I know you’ve got it covered,” Kandace said.

We said our goodbyes and disconnected.

She might be saying she had faith in me, but she still had to follow up. She still had to remind me that my job wasn’t done, and I hated that. I loathed feeling like something had fallen through the cracks because of me.

It was time to stop fucking around—literally—button down, and do my job.

diego

WHEN RAUL and I got back from the worksite, Eloise greeted us with big hugs. Carly stayed in the background, but that made sense. Eloise was a bit of a force of nature when she wanted to say *hello*.

“How was your day, little miss?” I scooped Eloise into my arms.

“It was so much *fun*.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. “What did you do?”

“We made a building just like you do at work, and then I taught Carly how to make a sandwich, and then we went to the store, and we looked at all the pretty clothes, and Carly bought me a bracelet, because I’m a secret assassin and I need this to keep me hidden and hunt my targets.”

That explained why Carly was wearing something different than when we left this morning. Eloise’s bracelet was a simple silver chain that looked like a decorative rope, and sparkled in the light as if it were lined with gems, despite it only being metal.

“We don’t assassinate people. It’s not considered polite.” Raul kissed Eloise on the top of her head.

“No, it’s okay. I’m a good assassin. I hunt them and save them.”

Six-year-old logic for the win. “That’s okay then.” I put her down again. “Do you want to show us your building?”

“No. It fell down. Carly said it was too loud.” A frown passed over Eloise’s face, and then she was smiling again. “But I can show you the rabbit we made.”

“Okay. Go get it.” I pointed her toward her playroom.

As Eloise ran off, I turned to Carly.

“The building was too loud?” Raul said.

Carly shrugged. “I told her it wasn’t structurally sound. Did everything go well?” Her tone was cool, and she seemed determined to keep at least a meter between us.

“Everything went fine.” I didn’t know what to make of her behavior.

“And you posted the clarification about the wedding and the fact that it was fake?” Carly asked

Fuck. “Of course I did.” It wasn’t that I’d ignored the task on purpose so much as it wasn’t a priority, so it slipped my mind. But I’d do it tonight. “How did things go here? Was Eloise too much?”

“She was an absolute angel. Except for the sandwich trauma. I’m not just saying that. She was very well behaved, even in the store,” Carly said.

Which was another thing that had me curious—what about today compelled Carly to go shopping for a new outfit. Before I could ask about the excursion, Eloise was back with a pink assortment of building blocks, attached to a smaller cube, with two ear-ish things sticking out of what was probably the head.

She handed the creation to Raul. “This is my bunny. Her name is Carly, too. She comes from a magical land of salty water, and she likes shopping and ice cream and ordering take-out.” She looked back at Carly, who’s blank expression shifted to a warm smile in an instant. “Did I get it right?” Eloise asked.

Carly nodded. “You most certainly did.”

“Daddy, doesn’t Carly look pretty? Both Carlys?”

I took a moment to examine the bunny, and at least as long to drag my gaze over Carly before looking her in the eye. “She looks beautiful.”

“She really does,” Raul said.

Pink crept into Carly’s cheeks, despite her neutral expression. “I should get going.”

“No. Stay. Play. Daddies can tell you about their boring day.” Eloise grabbed Carly’s hand.

Carly pulled away gently and ruffled her hair.

“Go put bunny Carly away.” Raul handed the plastic rabbit back to Eloise.

She ran off again.

“Do you need anything else from me?” Carly asked the instant our girl was out of earshot. Her voice was strained.

Your company. I didn’t suspect that would go over well, given Carly’s demeanor.

“No. Thank you for today.” Raul matched her tone with a frustrating precession.

This time her smile was tight. “You’re welcome. I’ll see you at the worksite tomorrow.”

“Of course.” Raul nodded, and showed her to the door.

I held onto my growl of frustration until she was gone, then let the sound slide out. “This isn’t right.”

“She’s not going to stick around indefinitely.” Raul didn’t look at me. “She’s not a mother, and she’s not a wife. What do you want for dinner.” He was already walking toward the kitchen.

I followed, no longer trying to leash my reactions. “Were you in the same room as me just now? Did you see the way Eloise was acting?” She barely got that excited about spending the day at Nonna’s, and Raul’s mother spoiled her more than we did.

Raul pulled the cut of beef we’d bought on the way home from the bag, and set the paper-wrapped meat on the counter. “Carly’s good at what she does. I expect at *everything* she does, including babysitting. That doesn’t change what I just said.”

“She’s not Isabella.” Why did I need to say that? Because that had to be one of Raul’s hesitations—he didn’t want to go through that again. Not that I blamed him.

“She’s not.” As he talked, he rolled up his sleeves, then grabbed a series of spices from the rack. “Not in either direction. You know what Carly is, though? Going back to The States in a month or two.”

“Aren’t you having fun with her?” How was I the only one who felt that connection?

Raul sprinkled liberal helpings of seasoning on the meat, but didn’t rub it in yet. “I’m having a blast, but that doesn’t change anything either.”

Fuck. He was right, and I didn't have anything to say that would change the fact that Carly didn't live here. That she couldn't be a long-term part of our lives if she went back to her own.

Raul wiped his hands clean and closed the distance between us. He pulled my arms around his waist and then wrapped his around mine. He pressed our foreheads together. "I want the same thing you do," he said softly. "I want an additional someone in my life. In yours. In Eloise's. But it's not her." Did his voice crack on the *her*?

I wouldn't call him on that. I wouldn't ruin this moment.

Instead, I helped him make dinner. We listened to Eloise give us more detail about her day with Carly. I tried to ignore the ache at the joy on her face. Was it a mistake to introduce Carly to our daughter?

God I hated that thought, but that didn't mean I was wrong to ask the question.

As the night wound down, we got Eloise ready for bed, tucked her in, read her a story, and gave her good night kisses.

Then we headed to our own room.

"Should I ask what's on your mind, or do I already know?" Raul asked, when the door was closed behind us.

I might as well say it out loud. "Was it a mistake to introduce Carly to Eloise?"

"We introduce a lot of our friends—"

"You know that's not what I'm asking."

Raul scrubbed his face. "I do."

There was no denying that Eloise was already smitten with Carly.

“We can’t have Carly over anymore.” Raul managed to say the words without emotion. “For Eloise’s sake and yours.”

I hated the idea, and I hated that he was right.

Raul cupped my face between his palms and pressed his forehead to mine. “You think I don’t get it, but I do. If you think Carly’s not drawing me in every time she’s around, you’re wrong.”

The confession caught me off-guard, but I felt the realness of it.

He tilted his head to press his mouth to mine. Softly. Sweetly. “But we still have each other. We will *always* have each other.”

“We will.”

Raul trailed his fingers along my jaw, down my neck and chest, to my waist. With practiced efficiency, he had my belt and trousers undone with barely more than a flick of his wrist.

He slid his body down mine, taking my clothing with him. When he wrapped a loose hand around my semi-hard shaft, I groaned in appreciation at his touch. And when he took me in his mouth, I was fully erect.

I wanted to sink back against the nearest wall, or on to the bed, and relish everything about his touch. “This isn’t a solution. Orgasms aren’t going to solve anything.” Damn me and my brain.

Raul dragged his tongue along my length as he let my cock fall from his mouth. He looked up at me from where he knelt at my feet, eyes dark with lust and sincerity. “This isn’t me

avoiding anything, if that's what you're saying. It's not us ignoring a reality we don't want to face or muting it. This is a connection. Between you and me. We're part of each other, and I want—need—you to remember that.”

He gripped me again and glided his mouth down my shaft.

I forced myself to push away doubt about Carly. To push her from my mind at all. Raul was right, I needed to focus on how I was linked to him.

And it was an intense bond. Not just because he was sucking my cock. The cord that tied us to each other was vibrant and strong and unbreakable. I pulled Raul to his feet, fumbling with his belt and trousers before he finished standing.

“I need to be inside you,” I growled against his skin as I sank my teeth into his shoulder. Before I finished shoving his clothes to the ground, I had him on his knees on the bed, tight ass at the perfect height.

I kept one hand on Raul, not wanting to break the circuit that kept electricity flowing between us, and reached into the drawer for lube.

When he had a slippery opening and I had a slick dick, I entered him from behind. Need had me moving faster than maybe I should—that drive to be a part of him—but the sounds that tore from Raul's throat were pure pleasure.

I loved this feeling, and I wanted to grip his hips and pound hard and fast, but I resisted the urge. Instead, I reached around to fist his cock. Staying buried inside him, I fed off the heat. The bond. All while I stroked.

The hum of building pleasure rolled through Raul and vibrated against me. I used the deliciously familiar cues of the

sounds he made to guide my pace and grip as short jerks tugged his hips, and his groans became punctuated bursts, I knew he was close.

He covered my hand with his and set a faster pace. “Fuck me hard,” he grunted.

That was all I needed to hear. I let the leash on my control snap, and worked my hips and legs, slamming inside him. When he came, he coated both our hands with a sticky mess, and the warm slickness only increased my need.

I moved my grip to his hips, and dug my fingers in as I lost myself in how incredible Raul felt wrapped around me. I tumbled toward release as it built inside me. Surging. Pushing. Tightening in every inch of me.

And when I came, I wanted the release to go on for an eternity. To move into this moment of bliss that was just the two of us, and the love we had for each other and the promises we’d made to each other.

I would never let this feeling go.

The frantic need that had wrapped around us faded, and I slowly softened and pulled out of Raul. Cleaning up was fun. Collapsing on the bed next to my husband was incredible.

But what about Carly?

The thought slammed into me out of nowhere.

What about her? Raul was right, even though my heart swore he was wrong.

raul

FOR THE REST of the week, Carly was a level of professional I'd rarely seen in my life. She was efficient, she was composed, and she was never closer to us than she had to be.

Fine with me. The starker the line dividing us from our fling—regardless of how fun it was—the better.

Diego and I spent the weekend the way we usually did. Spending time with Eloise, enjoying each other's company, and unwinding. Two things made this weekend different from any other...

The number of times Eloise asked when Carly would be back. Each time, I gave her the same answer: Carly didn't live here, she was only visiting, so she probably wouldn't be back. And each time, Eloise would frown and say *okay*, and I would feel like the worst dad in the world for breaking her heart.

And the two calls, one on Saturday and one on Sunday, from Curtis. They sounded like friendly calls. Both of them along the lines of *I just wanted to check on you. See if you've made any decisions about changing directions*. And both times I told him *Of course we haven't*.

Monday morning, as I finished cleaning up her breakfast dishes, she ran from the kitchen and into her playroom. A

moment later she was back.

“Daddy, I made this.” Eloise handed me a slightly humanoid-looking collection of green Legos.

I took it from her with all the care an original Eloise creation deserved. “It’s fantastic. Does it have a story?”

“Not yet. You have to give it to Carly, and she can tell the alien’s story.”

“Okay.”

Eloise scowled. “Promise you’ll give it to Carly.”

I tucked it into my shirt pocket and patted it gently. There was no way I was going to tell her *no*. “I promise I’ll give it to Carly and ask her for the alien’s story.” And I had at least a little while to figure out what kind of response would be least likely to break Eloise’s heart if Carly didn’t want it.

The notion sent a spike of anger and hurt through me, and I suppressed the reaction.

Diego and I made sure Eloise was set for the day with Ariana, and headed to the church.

Carly was already waiting, sitting at the table, typing away on the tablet she carried everywhere on the job site. Seeing her there, hair pulled into a messy bun, loose strands teasing her neck, and I had a flashback to last week. Taking her... Sharing her with Diego... Feeling her tight, slick heat wrapped around me...

The memory was better than coffee to get my pulse racing first thing, and far worse if I wanted to get anything done today.

She looked up as we approached, and her smile was the same cool one she’d used at the end of last week. “Happy

Monday, gentlemen. Ready to continue your drive for world conquest?”

“One restaurant at a time.” I was also ready to ignore the background noise and do business.

Carly’s gaze landed on my chest, and heat raced over me.

“Is that a pocket full of toys, or are you just happy to see me?” she winced the instant the words passed her lips.

I raised my brows. “Yes. I have a pectoral erection.”

“Pec-rection?” Diego laughed. “Is that a thing?”

This was going to get ridiculous and quickly. I pulled the alien out and handed it to Carly. “Eloise made you a present. She says you need to tell the alien’s story.”

Carly’s smile went from sad to warm to professional all in the amount of time it took her to grasp the mini figurine. “Tell her thank you, and that I will share their story as soon as they share it with me.” She set it next to her tablet with the utmost care.

“Hey, we have a problem. Boss wants to talk to you.” A new voice cut through the fun. One of the work crew stood in the doorway leading to the kitchen.

We followed him in a neat little train, through the demolished kitchen, and out to the back alley. A pallet of boxes waited for us, with one of them set aside and open.

When I saw the flash of almost neon blue glinting in the morning sun, I knew what was wrong before anyone said anything. “That’s not the right tile.” For anything. Anywhere in my life. “Where did this come from?”

“It’s what was delivered,” the contractor said.

“Stand by. We’ll figure out what’s going on.” Diego looked as frustrated as I felt.

He and I started making calls, tracking along the supply chain. Carly watched and listened and muttered about wishing she spoke better Italian.

I finally got someone on the line who had more answers for me than *Nothing’s changed. We shipped what we were told.*

“We were told the request changed. I got the information from Ms. Hammond’s assistant,” he told me in Italian, with the confidence of a man who knew he’d done nothing wrong.

Carly’s assistant? *“Ms. Hammond doesn’t have an assistant.”* Did she? I covered the mouthpiece. “Do you have an assistant?” I whispered to Carly.

She frowned and shook her head.

“What was the name of the person you talked to?” I returned to the phone call.

“He didn’t give it. But I can tell you he was American and didn’t speak the language nearly as well as he thought.”

What? That would make sense, if the call came from The Raphael Group, but I’d never talked to anyone there who even pretended to speak Italian, and they wouldn’t have made this request without telling Carly. Without telling us. *“We need the tile we originally ordered.”*

“Can’t do it. The original is a high demand design. The instant the order was canceled, someone else snatched it up.”

My frustration soared. This was going to cost us time. Money. *“We can’t use what we were sent.”*

“You can pay the restocking fee and we can send you something else in return.”

Fuck. *“I need to talk to my designer and builder. One of us will give you a call back. Don’t make any more changes to our account unless you hear from myself or Diego.”*

“Your euros.” He hung up.

I wanted desperately to let the man know what I thought of his flippant attitude, but not until we had what we needed from him. I gave Carly and Diego a brief rundown of the conversation.

As I explained, Carly went pale, and when I finished, realization sank in. It was insane, but I had to ask. “Would Curtis do something like this?”

She worked her jaw. “I’d love to say *no*, but fuck. He might. When I left him, he told my boss the divorce was because I’d been sleeping with her husband. He’d never even met the man. He’s not above being petty, and he doesn’t care who gets huts, unless he’s changed.”

Something told me he hadn’t. “Would he have sent that email last week? The one that looked like it was from you that almost got my kitchen destroyed?”

The creases around her eyes and mouth deepened. “Fuck. Maybe. I’d love to say he wouldn’t go that far, but... he would. I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t on you, it’s on him.” Diego’s words echoed my thoughts. “Besides, we told him *no* too, so this could be about us.”

Christ, what an immature asshole. We’d figure out what to do about Curtis after we fixed the current issue though. “What do we do about the tile?”

Diego had his phone out again. “I’ll call the supplier back and find out what they have in stock that meets our

requirements and that we can get enough of within the next week.”

“I’ll call Curtis.” Carly looked furious.

I’d love to make that call myself, but it might end in death threats. “Are we sending the work crew home?”

“We have to,” Carly said. “There’s nothing else they can do today. But we’ll figure out how we can rearrange the schedule once we have the tile answer.” She sighed loudly. “We accounted for delays and mistakes. They always happen. We have money and time in the budget as long as we’re smart about how we handle this.”

That didn’t reassure me as much as she probably wanted it to, but I was grateful she could say the words and sound sincere.

Diego and Carly made their calls, and I sent the work crew home. I promised the contractor we’d have more information for him by the end of the day, and he promised me we’d still be paying for their wasted time.

Wonderful. Not.

When it was just the three of us left, Carly, Diego, and I sat at that same table again. The memories of the other night were back, and I wasn’t in the mood. That didn’t stop the images of Carly, the whispers across my skin, from tormenting me.

The reminder brought back that little nagging part of me that I’d been trying to ignore for days. The part that agreed with Diego that Carly could be a great longer-term fixture in our lives.

I shoved the feeling aside in favor of getting work done.

Carly hadn't been able to get a hold of Curtis, but Diego had new tile options for us. He forwarded them to Carly, and she pulled them up on her iPad, so we could all gather around and make a decision.

The decision we made was that they all sucked.

"Alternatives. Let's discuss them," Carly said.

I wanted the original tile I'd picked for *my kitchen*. "I saw an entire subway station floor once that was tiled with *centissimo*."

"I feel like that might be more expensive than actual tile." Diego wrinkled his nose.

Carly jabbed at her screen, and pulled up a new picture. It was impossible to determine why she was showing us computer parts until she said, "My brother has a friend whose bathroom is tiled with circuit boards."

"That sounds really cool." Diego twisted his head this way and that.

It kind of did, and my family had access to that kind of hardware. But this wasn't the right place for that look. Also, "That sounds really nerdy."

"Nerdy can be sexy." The way Carly tossed out the reply, without thought, with a playful smile... *That* was sexy.

"I can be nerdy." My answer came easily. Smoothly.

Diego smirked and shook his head. "Possibly not the way Carly is thinking."

"Ooh, idea." Carly's face lit up. "If Curtis is so infatuated with proving... I don't know. Whatever. We could tile it with his—"

“Don’t say *his entrails*.” I didn’t know where my suggestion came from, but I was filled with both horror and justice at the concept.

The disgust and horror that crossed Carly’s face was reasonable, but not as potent as I expected. “*Eww*.” She wrinkled her nose. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I told you *not* to say that.” I wasn’t the bad guy here.

She stuck out her tongue. “I was going to say we could tile it with his and my divorce papers. *Eww*. Seriously.”

“She’s right. There’s something wrong with you.” Diego’s tone was playful rather than accusatory.

And it wasn’t as though I was suggesting doing *that*. I was saying the opposite. “Wrong with me in all the right ways.”

Diego grinned. “I can’t argue that.”

Carly huffed, but her smile was peeking through. She opened her mouth.

“I hoped I’d find you both here.” That was Isabella’s voice, not Carly’s.

My blood ran cold as our ex-wife walked into the room, and my entire world was yanked out from under me.

early

“ISABELLA.” Raul’s voice was cool.

This woman was their ex?

I didn’t like the look of her. Normally, I wasn’t petty—I’d adjust anyone’s crown without raising a fuss, and all that—but Isabella was striking. In-your-face, long, dark hair, perfect skin, striking.

And I hated her for walking away from her family even more than I did for the way she looked. Though, she’d downgraded with the man whose arm she was on. He was attractive, and the ink that ran along his arms and neck was intricate and beautiful.

But he wasn’t Diego or Raul, and if he couldn’t measure up to one of them, he’d never measure up to both of them.

“Raul. Diego. It’s been so long.” She approached Raul, and it looked like she might kiss him on the cheeks.

He backed away, and ice spilled from him.

She turned to Diego, and the way he raised his eyebrow seemed to be enough to make her take a step back. “Five years,” he said. “What are you doing here, Isabella?”

Her smile never faltered, but it hadn't looked genuine to begin with. "I heard you remarried. I had to meet the lucky lady. Is this her?"

A million thoughts raced through my mind in a split second, starting with *I knew Diego still hadn't fucking posted that retraction* and ending with *if this woman thinks we're married, might as well as play it up. Bitch can choke on my tit.*

Yeah, I really didn't like her. That didn't stop me from pasting on my most sugar smile and extending my hand. "Hi, I'm Carly. Isabella, is it? Are you a cousin or something? Raul has such a great family; I love meeting more of you."

"I'm the original, hon." She looked me over with disdain.

Who knew? We had something in common.

"The original, the only ex-wife." Diego slipped an arm around my waist.

It was easy to lean into him. Didn't take any faking at all, unlike this conversation. I was grateful the work crew was gone for the day, though. Losing their time sucked, but I didn't need witnesses to me being lovey dovey with Diego and Raul. No one beyond this woman.

Her companion looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here. I gave him a more friendly smile, though if he was dating Isabella he may not deserve it. No reason to judge yet. "Are you Isabella's...?" I trailed off on purpose.

"Entourage. Bodyguard. Jack of all trades. You can call me Joystick." He shook my hand.

Unimpressed with the name, but my brother had friends with more ridiculous ones. Did he look familiar? No. I was imagining that.

“No. Really. What are you doing here?” Raul slipped his hand into my free one.

I squeezed. It probably wouldn't comfort him, but I wanted him to know I was here for whatever they needed when it came to *her*.

Some of Isabella's fake smile slipped away, and a frown crept in. Oddly enough, the new expression didn't look any more genuine than the old one. “I just want to see my baby girl. Please.”

Oh *hell* no.

“No.” Diego put a terrifyingly sexy amount of force into a single word. “And Eloise isn't yours. Not anymore.”

“She's staying with family tonight, which you aren't. It doesn't matter how often you ask, you left. You're not seeing her,” Raul said.

I had never been so turned on by something so completely non-sexual before.

“I suppose this... woman... has taken my place?” Isabella sneered.

I stared back impassively. “You left. You would need to have been in a place, for me to take it from you.” That sounded so much more clever in my head.

“Eloise actually recognizes Carly. Adores her.” Diego's words both warmed and cut through me in a way I didn't expect. “She wouldn't be able to pick you out of a line-up.”

Raul stepped forward. “Leave. Now. Or I'll have you removed from the property.”

“Whoa.” Joystick wedged himself between Raul and Isabella. “She's a mother who wants to see her child. Who the

fuck are you to turn her down? Eloise is her flesh and blood.”

The way he raised himself up to full height, his ink, the sneer in his voice, all made him imposing and almost scary.

But he didn't hold a candle to Diego's presence. “Isabella walked out. That was her choice, not ours. This is the consequence.” His tone was hard.

“Because of stress. Postpartum depression. The pressure of living with a public family.” Joystick recited the list with passion. A list likely fed to him by Isabella.

“She left to pursue her acting career,” Raul said.

I wasn't big on reality TV, but this was the kind of drama I couldn't look away from. It was also personal, and it shouldn't be. I hated that this woman had wormed her way into Raul and Diego's lives. Had abandoned Eloise.

“One of you isn't even her real father,” Joystick said.

Big mistake.

Diego had Joystick's shirt in his fist before I could blink, and was raising his other hand threateningly.

Isabella pushed them apart. Not Diego so much—it was clear he wasn't backing down—but she nudged Joystick back. “Let me see Eloise, or I'll make my request a legal one next time. My asking you first was a courtesy.”

Raul's sneer, Diego's glare, were potent and vicious.

“You won't come near her. Ever.” Raul growled. “Get the fuck out.”

I wanted to follow Isabella as she walked from the church, and kick her ass. Not that I knew how to do such a thing, but I was willing to learn for this.

One thing I could do, wait a day or two before I reminded Diego again about posting that wedding retraction information. The men would drive Isabella out soon enough, and then we could handle the already fading gossip. Until then, the more that pissed her off the better.

The three of us tried to get back to work, but the men were distracted. Raul called his mother every hour to check on Eloise. Not that I blamed him. We finally decided on the tile, and while they weren't as happy about it as they had been their first pick, some of that was probably because of the events of the day.

Seriously. Who the fuck did that woman think she was? Vanishing. No contact. Nearly five years. And she just walked back into their lives like it was a perfectly reasonable and normal thing to do.

We decided to call it a day, since we weren't getting any work done. "If this was Curtis, I'd ask if I should go back to your place with you, to keep up appearances, in case Isabella was watching." My joke came out strangled. I hadn't heard back from him, and that made me even more suspicious.

Raul's scowl was stark. "I hate that he treated you like that. What kind of person does that?"

"That same kind who tries to have an entire construction project fail, either because you told him *no* or I did." I'd learned my lesson about narcissistic ex's. I wished it was one I hadn't had to learn, but I knew better now.

Raul shook his head. "That's fucked up."

"If we're comparing ex's, I have to admit I want to deck yours now that I met her." I was trying to keep this conversation light. Pretty sure I was failing.

“I would’ve paid to see that,” Diego said. “You would win.”

“I don’t know about that, but I would’ve put on a good show.” No hair pulling and clawing for me. I’d come out swinging. “For her to just demand what she did...”

Diego shouldered his laptop bag. “If you want to come back to our place, you just have to ask.”

“That’s not what she was saying.” Raul looked at me. “Though, he’s right.”

I was thinking about it. I shouldn’t. I needed to return to my hotel, spend the night alone, and forget that anything else was ever an option. But *I’d love to come back to your place* hovered on the tip of my tongue.

My phone rang, saving me, and relief flooded inside when I saw that it was Daria, not Curtis. “One minute,” I told the guys before I answered the call. “Hey, you.”

“Hey.” Daria sounded bright. Happy. “Where are you?”

Weird way to start the conversation. “The worksite. Why?”

“Because we’re at your hotel and they’re calling your room and you’re not picking up.”

She was where? Wait. “We?”

“Me. The girls. Brooke. Adam.”

What? “What?”

“Happy birthday. And *surprise*.” In the background, a scattered wave of *surprise* came from Daria’s phone.

Oh. Wow. Umm... “We’re wrapping up here. Long day, you know how it goes. I’ll tell you about it when I get there.”

Be there in half an hour?" But would I really tell her about *all* of it? I didn't know.

"Okay. See you then," Daria said.

"That's a *no* on coming back to our place?" Diego waited until I hung up to ask, and a hint of disappointment traced his question.

I was a bit bummed, too. Not that my friends were here, but... "Apparently Daria is here to surprise me for my birthday."

"It's your birthday?" Raul looked surprised. And possibly also like he was plotting.

Crap. "Not for a few more days." I'd love to *not* remember that I was almost a decade older than these men, and having them do the math and add another year to my age wouldn't help.

"Were you going to tell us?" Diego asked.

"Probably not?"

His frown said that was the wrong answer.

"That's fair." At least Raul seemed to understand. "Have a good night, and tell Daria we said *hi*."

I gave them tight smiles, ignored the tug that wanted me to stay, and headed back to my hotel. When I got there, Brooke and Adam had already checked into their own room. Colin, Tanner, and Deacon hadn't made the trip because they couldn't take the time away from their businesses. There was plenty of room for Daria and the girls to stay in my little cabin.

Besides, I hadn't used the place half the time I was here, so maybe this made up for that in some sort of weird, round-about way?

When I showed Daria and her girls to my place, Harmony was tentative and Alana was aloof about their shared room. But within minutes, they were each picking a bed, and Harmony was planning where the stuffed toys she'd brought with her would sleep.

Daria joined me in the living room, while they settled in. She and I caught up a little on her flight. I promised to give her a tour of the city tomorrow night when we had a little more time.

“Unless you're working. If you give us a map and tell us where to go, we can find our way around,” Daria said.

Working. Unless that tile came in PDQ, it was unlikely we'd be doing late hours for a few days. And no more overnight hours, for sure. Thank God Daria was here to save me from myself and my bad decisions. “It shouldn't be a problem.”

“What's going on?” Daria asked.

Uh... “Nothing?”

She stared at me.

I returned the favor. Did I have *I slept with our clients* written on my face or something?

“You called me in the middle of the night, just a few days after you got here, you're acting cagey now. Tell me.” She prodded.

I had to give her something. “I think Curtis is sabotaging our project.” *Wow* that sounded stupid when I said it out loud to someone who hadn't seen what we'd been through.

Her scowl and grunt were encouraging. “Why can't that asshole leave you alone? What can I do?”

“Apparently he approached the guys about doing this for them before we got involved. So he’s bitter on two fronts. But you’re on vacation. I won’t let you do anything.” I grabbed a bottle of wine out of the fridge, and two glasses, and joined her on the couch.

The lines in Daria’s forehead grew deeper. “I will if I need to.”

“I know.” In fact, having her here helped me relax. Daria always had my back.

“How is it, working with Raul and Diego?” she asked. “They seemed nice enough in the offices—that great blend of silently imposing and outwardly assertive.” She took the bottle from me and filled the glasses almost to the brim.

That sounded exactly like them. “Amazing.” Too much. “I mean good. Great. Fine. They’re fine.” *Shut up now.*

“So, it’s good, then?” Amusement had replaced Daria’s scorn about Curtis. She sipped her wine. “Does it taste better because it’s from here, or just because I expect it to?”

“Both.” I wanted to tell her. Everything. Such a bad idea, but I hated keeping this secret. “I fucked up, Dar.”

“What’s wrong?”

I stared at my drink as the burgundy liquid wobbled with each breath I took. Nothing was wrong. Everything was wrong. This was a fucking mess.

“Is this why you called the other night? What happened? Was it Curtis?” Daria set her glass down and leaned in.

I didn’t mean to worry her like that. “Curtis didn’t do anything more than what I told you. Not that I know of.” He probably had. “I met the guys on the plane. Raul and Diego.”

“Makes sense. You flew out at the same time.”

Yeah. I really should've thought of that *on the plane*. Hey, me, these sexy men with Italian accents are probably your clients. “They didn't give me their real names, so I didn't know who they were.” That was my story, and I was sticking to it. “And you know how my flight was delayed?”

“Yes.”

“For a hurricane. I didn't want to be alone during the storms.” I didn't have to say why. Daria understood. “So I invited them to share my room.”

The realization that spread across Daria's face was almost cartoonish. “Fuck. Did you sleep with them in Philly?”

“No.” Honest truth. Sort of. “I mean, we slept, but there was no fucking.”

Daria seemed to relax. “Okay. So what's with the build-up?”

I finished my drink in a single swallow, and waited for the buzz to rush to my head. Instead, the wine landed in my stomach with a heavy *thud*. “I didn't screw them until we got here. After I figured out who they were.”

“Oh. Oh, Carly.”

I couldn't interpret Daria's tone, but it cut deep. “Don't you dare judge me. I cheered you on when you hooked up with Tanner and Colin.”

“I'm not, I swear.” She was quick with the assurance. “I don't want to see you hurt, but I'm not judging.” She gave me a sly smile. “Was it good? Were they good?”

“It was so, so good.” *So good.*

“That was the night you called me.”

I nodded. “I left after they fell asleep. Snuck out like a proper early morning walk of shame. I couldn’t face them the next morning. Or their little girl. She’s so sweet. *They’re* so sweet. And fuckable. Fuck.”

“You’ve got it bad.” Daria searched my face. “You know the consequences, so I won’t weigh you down with the list, but if you’re feeling something for them, maybe you shouldn’t ignore it...”

“Nope. This is lust. I’m not feeling anything more for them.” I pushed power into the words, as much for my benefit as hers. “I have an ex-husband issue and a project that I will complete. There are no other *feelings*.”

Daria’s frown reflected my own doubt, and I hated that.

raul

MY ANGER with Isabella being back, with her making ridiculous demands and even more ludicrous threats, lingered through the night and into the next morning. I was reluctant to leave Eloise at home today, but Ariana assured us that they would be fine, and that if anyone showed up claiming to be *Mom* that she'd call us immediately and keep the woman out.

“Why now?” Diego asked for the billionth time as we headed to the church.

And for the billionth time, I didn't have an answer.

We reached the building about the same time as Carly. As much as I tried to tell myself otherwise, seeing her made me smile. It didn't matter how she looked, though this morning she had a cup of coffee in hand, her hair was already pulled into a messy bun, and she was wearing glasses.

Hello, sexy teacher fantasy.

I pointed to my own eyes. “You wear glasses?”

“Contacts.” Carly said. “But I was up a little too late drinking with Daria, and my eyes weren't having that this morning.”

“Is she the bad influence friend?” Diego asked.

Not that I'd seen. When we met Daria in Salt Lake she was professional, competent, and excelled at her job. It didn't surprise me that she and Carly were friends.

Carly shook her head with a laugh. "No. She's the smart *let's plan everything* friend. Brooke is the good *are you sure we should do this* friend, who we found either fifteen years too late, or at the perfect time, depending on your perspective. I'm the bad influence."

Diego looked her over in a way that made my blood roar, wanting to see them together again. "I'm not sure I believe that," he said.

"Good." Carly grinned. "That means I've done my job."

She really was sexy. And smart. And compelling. Maybe Diego was right—she was exactly what we needed in our lives.

Of course, every argument I gave him still stood. Isabella being back was a good reminder that we couldn't let someone into Eloise's life who wouldn't stay, and Carly wasn't staying.

"SPEAKING OF MY FRIENDS, I told them they could come by at lunch for a tour of the place." Carly interrupted my thoughts. "If that's all right."

I wanted to counter with *As long as we can come to your birthday party*. I wouldn't say that, though.

"Of course it is." Fortunately Diego was on it. "We'd love to meet everyone."

The three of us got to work. Carly was back to being cool and professional. It was exactly what she needed to be, but I

missed how easily she'd slipped her hand into mine yesterday. How comfortable it was to see Diego wrap an arm around her waist.

Sure, that was for Isabella's benefit, but I couldn't help but want it to be a more permanent thing.

Diego, Carly, and I were prepping a portion of the building for demo work, when an echo rang out through the room. "And shepherds we shall be, for Thee, my Lord, for Thee."

What the...?

The voice carried through open air, and the speaker seemed to have a good grasp of how to use acoustics to his advantage. "Power hath descended forth from Thy hand, that our feet may swiftly carry out Thy command. So we shall flow a river forth to Thee, and teeming with souls shall it ever be."

I'd be a lot more concerned about the words, if a tiny smirk wasn't playing on Carly's face.

"What is that?" Diego asked.

"Boondock Saints," I said at the same time as Carly.

He looked between us. "How do you both know that?"

Was he serious? "How do you not? How did I marry a man who doesn't know Boondock Saints?"

"Sounds like a tragedy in the making." A man stepped through the nearest doorway—the owner of the movie-quoting voice.

He was with Daria, which meant these were Carly's friends. There was another woman with them as well, and two younger girls, one in her teens and one about Eloise's age.

“You couldn’t pick a less threatening way to announce yourself?” Despite Carly’s question, her grin was broad now.

The man shrugged. “I’m in a church. It was the obvious choice. Would you prefer, *I was the first angel, loved once above all others. A perfect love. But like all true loves... one day it withered on the vine...*” He sang the last few lines.

“Boondock Saints again?” Diego asked.

“Prophecy,” Carly said at the same time as the man.

She was even sexier than I thought, and apparently my husband’s movie knowledge was seriously lacking. “We need to brush up on your movies,” I said to Diego.

“I’ll give you a list.” The man already had his phone out. “Better yet, I’ll be there. Name the time and place.”

Carly gave a light laugh. “Gentlemen, these are my friends. You’ve just met Adam.” The man bowed deeply. “The lovely woman on his arm is Brooke. You know Daria. And these are her daughters Alana and Harmony.”

Harmony, the younger one, curtsied. “*Ciao.*”

Eloise was going to like her.

“Hello.” Alana blushed and ducked her head.

I could wait an eternity for Eloise to reach the age where older men made her shy.

Carly pointed at us. “Raul and Diego. Now everyone knows everyone.”

The group of us took off on a tour of the building. Adam asked all the right questions about the stained glass and the architecture to make Diego light up, and Alana and Harmony were quite well behaved.

Until Harmony found the confessionals. “Mommy, I’m bored. Let’s play hide and seek.” She ducked into one of the small boxes before anyone could answer.

Alana yanked open the door. “They’re not for hiding. They’re for confessing your sins.”

“What are sins?” Harmony asked.

Alana crossed her arms and huffed. “They’re when you do stupid things. Like now.”

“I’m not stupid. You’re stupid.” Harmony’s response was shrill and loud.

Daria looked mortified. “I’m so sorry. We’re not church people.”

“I’ve got this.” I stepped between the girls and crouched in front of Harmony, who was still sitting in the confessional. “Do you want to learn something your sister doesn’t know?”

Behind me, Alana huffed again.

Harmony nodded.

“The Italian word for Harmony is *armonia*. It means two people who sing a beautiful song together. Which is the one thing that’s even more fun here than hide and seek. Do you want to see?”

She was watching me with wide, curious eyes. “Yes.”

I took her hand and led her to the front of the chapel, where the choir traditionally stood. “This is where people sing from.” I showed her the spot for the soloist. “Do you want to try?”

She stepped forward, looked out over the room and the entire group watching us, and ran back to my side. “No.”

“What’s your favorite song?” I asked her.

“Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.”

I looked up at Daria, who shrugged.

There were far worse answers, and at least I knew the lyrics to that one. “I guess I’ll have to sing it alone, but then it won’t be *armonia*.”

“I’ll sing with you.” Carly joined us. She knelt to look Harmony in the eye. “You don’t have to stay up here.”

Harmony grabbed her hand.

Faint, tinny music reached our ears, and I realized Adam was holding up his phone, and the song was playing.

I wasn’t a singer. As a child they specifically kept me off the choir, mostly because I was incapable of keeping a beat. But I did love singing along to the music anyway, and Carly carried the tune beautifully, so she kept me on track.

As we headed into the second verse, Harmony joined us. Her voice was tiny and tentative at first, but by the chorus she was singing along at the top of her lungs. Carly swooped her into her arms.

By the end of the song, everyone in the chapel was singing. It was loud and out of tune and one of the most glorious sounds I’d ever heard. When we finished, I turned to Harmony. “That was *armonia*.”

“I like it.” She grinned.

Carly set her on the ground, and Harmony ran back to Daria. “And people say musicals are unrealistic,” Carly said to me. “Tell me you’ve never done that before.”

“I haven’t.” It was true. “But the situation seemed to call for it.”

She shook her head, but she was smiling. “I might think it was super sweet that you’re good with everyone’s kids, if I wasn’t a bitter old bachelorette.” Her tone was light and her voice soft.

“No talking like that,” I scolded her. “Or I’ll spank you.”

“Promises promises.” Carly spun away on her toe, her smirk never fading, and headed back to her friends.

I joined them, and we continued our tour with renewed enthusiasm.

“*Oh*. I almost forgot.” Daria’s exclamation came out of nowhere.

Carly gave her a warning look.

Odd reaction.

“Forgot what?” Diego stepped right through that open conversation door.

Daria looked at him and me. “The two of you need to come to Carly’s birthday celebration. Night after tomorrow. Bring your girl, unless you have plans.”

Did Carly just growl? And how much did Daria know about what had happened between the three of us.

I already knew what Diego’s answer would be, and I shouldn’t play along. A birthday party with friends was innocent enough, but it felt like every extra moment spent with Carly was another excuse. Another reason to forget she wasn’t a permanent part of our lives.

“We’d love to,” I said.

Diego's phone rang, and when he said, "It's Ariana," Ice ran through my veins, and I halted abruptly.

diego

ARIANA DIDN'T CALL us at work often, but it didn't mean her reasons for doing so were bad. Still, as I answered the phone, disquiet ran through me. "*Ciao.*"

"There's a woman here, like you said. She's claiming she's Eloise's mother and she wants me to let her in. I told her no, but she's not leaving."

My anger spiked. "*I'll be right there. Call me if you need.*" I hung up to find the entire group watching me. Raul was the only one I cared about. "I need to go."

"Isabella?" Raul asked. "I'll come too."

"It's okay. I've got it. We'll be back soon." I understood his desire to join me, and if he'd taken the call I'd feel the same, but there was no reason to tear us both away.

Raul worked his jaw as if he was going to argue, then gave me a short nod instead.

I tried not to count the seconds between the church and the apartment, and failed. When I arrived, Isabella was nowhere to be seen. I pushed inside to find Ariana sitting on the couch, fidgeting with her hands, while Eloise sat nearby, singing along with the TV.

Eloise grinned when she saw me. “Daddy. You’re home from work early.”

“I’m only here for a little while.” I scooped her into my arms. “But you and Ariana are coming back to work with me.”

“We are? *Huzzah*. Is it because of the scary lady?”

Was it wrong that I wanted to smirk at her description? “Did you have to talk to the scary lady?”

“No. She went away again.”

“She left when I told her you were on your way here. I never opened the door for her,” Ariana said.

Good. But what the fuck was Isabella up to? I kissed Eloise on the forehead before setting her down. “Go grab three toys. You have to hurry, so we can go.” I didn’t expect another encounter while I was here, but an uncomfortable urgency spilled inside.

Eloise was so happy to spend the day at work with us that there was no dawdling. It wasn’t long before we’d joined Raul and the others at the church again. I was surprised Carly’s friends were still there.

“Raul told them what was going on,” Carly said. “They wanted to wait to make sure everyone was okay.”

“We’re fine.” I forced cheer into my voice, despite the rambling thoughts about *what is Isabella up to?* “I don’t want to delay any vacations.”

Daria smiled. “No delay. We’re here for Carly first, and she’s here for you.” That was a long pause. “For work.”

Carly shot Daria a look that was impossible to miss, and was filled with warning.

Fascinating.

I was about to shoo the tourist group out the door when Harmony walked up to Eloise. “My name is Harmony. You’re my new friend. What’s your name?”

Eloise looked at Raul and me, as if asking permission. Maybe the *scary lady* drove home the *don’t talk to strangers* lessons.

I gave her a nod of encouragement. “It’s okay. We know these people.”

Eloise grinned and turned back to Harmony. “I’m Eloise. My daddies say we can be friends.”

“I have lots of daddies too.” Harmony looked excited.

Eloise shook her head. “I don’t have lots. I only have two. That’s a normal number.”

“I have three. Plus a mommy.” Harmony pointed at Daria. “But one daddy doesn’t live with us because he’s a dickhead.”

“Daddy. What’s a dickhead?” Eloise asked us.

Adam did a poor job of hiding a snicker, and Brooke hid behind her hand. I assumed also hiding laughter.

I looked at Raul. This felt like the kind of question he should handle.

“I’m sorry.” Daria sounded mortified. “Harmony, you know we don’t talk like that.” She looked at us. “Her sister and her uncle—”

Alana huffed. “Don’t put this on me.”

“I get it.” Raul raised a hand. “My cousin has taught Eloise far worse, just in a different language.” He crouched in front

of Eloise. “You know those words we don’t say in front of other people?”

Eloise nodded.

“That’s what a dickhead is,” Raul said.

“Okay.” Eloise looked satisfied with the answer. She turned back to Harmony. “I didn’t have a mommy, but Carly’s going to be my mommy now.”

The adults’ amusement shifted to various levels of shock in a snap. This was where I should correct Eloise, but I didn’t want to.

“Carly’s not anyone’s mommy.” Apparently Harmony had this covered. “She says kids are best when you can feed them sugar and send them home with someone else at the end of the day.

I’d never seen Carly so bright red.

While I didn’t doubt that she’d said something like that, I wanted to hear her at least try to deny it, or correct the statement, or do something that would reassure Eloise. Not a fair expectation from me, but I wanted it anyway.

“We should get going.” Daria’s voice was a little too loud. “Let you all get back to work.” She took Harmony’s hand.

Harmony grabbed Eloise’s hand in her free one. “My new best friend is coming with us.”

I was certain Daria and her friends were capable people, but I wasn’t letting Eloise out of my site the rest of the day. “Eloise needs to stay here today,” I said firmly.

“Daddy, no.” Eloise’s bottom lip quivered.

So much for being excited to join us at work.

As if on cue, she and Harmony both started to cry.

Fuck. I picked up Eloise again, and tried to smooth her tears.

“Harmony.” Daria’s tone was sympathetic and sharp.

“We just met. You can’t tear us apart.” Harmony’s voice was surprisingly clear for a child who was bawling.

Ariana stepped up closer to Raul and me. “*I can watch them both,*” she said in soft Italian, only meant for our ears.

Like that, Eloise stopped crying. Apparently she heard anyway. “Can Harmony stay here with me and Ariana? *Please.*”

“Mommy, can I do that?” Harmony didn’t hesitate to join in. “*Please?*”

It was amazing what a beautiful chorus of begging two little girls could create.

“You’ll miss seeing Milan, Harmony.” Daria’s voice was firm.

Harmony shrugged. “I’ve seen pictures.”

I looked at Raul, and an entire conversation flowed between us without words. “We’re okay with it if you are.”

“She’ll appreciate the trip more when she’s older.” Carly gave Daria an apologetic look. “And I’ll be here.”

Daria sighed. “If you’re sure.” She focused on Ariana.

Our nanny nodded. “I’m positive.”

The girls cheered, and dragged Ariana with them as Eloise pulled Harmony to her favorite hiding spot under the altar.

“Thank you, and I’m sorry,” Daria said.

I gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s not a problem.”

“Here.” Raul scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Adam. “When you need a break from being tourists for an hour or two, classic movies, video games, and wine. Tell them I sent you.”

“Sweet.” Adam tucked the information away.

After a few more minutes of exchanged instructions with Daria, we pushed them out the door.

When they were gone, Carly tossed a glance at where the girls were playing happily. “I’m sorry about that. Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I’m positive.” I had a hard time denying my little girl anything, and if that included a new friend who kept Carly closer... Yes, I was going to take advantage of that.

We got back to work, but either Raul or I kept an eye on Eloise at all times. If Isabella was willing to go to the house while we were gone, and we had no idea why she was really here, I couldn’t rule out her walking right up to Eloise while no one was looking.

And if Isabella so much as touched a hair on Eloise’s head... I didn’t know what I was prepared to do, but we’d find out fast if it came to that.

early

SO THIS WAS FORTY-TWO. The woman staring back at me in the mirror didn't look any older than yesterday, but my brain had been hung-up on my new age all day. Turning forty didn't hit me this hard, why was today different from the last two birthdays?

My phone sat on the bathroom counter, and it buzzed with a new text. Another message from Curtis. The fifth or sixth today. None of them said things like *Happy Birthday* or *I got your message*, they all just said *I need you to call me*.

Manipulative fucker. He knew the vague notes would drive me nuts, and I was going to ignore him until he provided at least a hint of context for his request.

Daria stopped in the doorway of the cabin's master bath and looked me over. "I hope I look that good at your age." Her tone was playful.

"You're not even two years younger."

She shrugged. "I'm just saying."

"Well don't." Maybe I shouldn't have ribbed her so hard on her fortieth birthday.

She stepped into the room with me and straightened one of the straps on my dress, before looking me over again. "Your

guys would agree with me, but they'd be nicer about it. You look incredible.”

“They're not *my guys*.” I glanced in the mirror again. The dress was meant to be casual—sleeveless with a short sweater over the top, and a flowing skirt. I didn't look bad, so why did I feel like an imposter?

“They never stop watching you when you're in the room with them,” Daria said. “And the way they do that watching... They're your guys.”

But they weren't. Because they were my clients, and they lived in a different country than I did, and they were almost a decade younger than me.

And there it was. I was faking so much right now, including that I was young and carefree. “They're not.” I put enough force in my retort to let Daria know that conversation was over. We should go back to when I thought she was judging me for being with them. That was more like what I thought I should be feeling.

She pursed her lips and studied me. “You don't get to be grumpy just because the last number on your age changed between yesterday and today.”

I opened my mouth.

Daria held up a finger. “Don't you dare tell me you're older than me, because you know better.” She spoke forcefully. “You are going to have fun tonight, missy. Whether you like it or not.”

“How am I supposed to argue with that?” And why did it make me feel better?

“You're not.” She grabbed my hand and tugged me out of the bathroom. “Stop fussing, you look gorgeous and we're not

going to be late.”

I followed her into the living room, where Harmony and Alana were waiting. Harmony was in a pink dress with a poofy skirt—her princess dress. Alana was dressed more simply, but just as elegantly in pressed slacks and a light sweater.

How was Daria teasing me about her age when her oldest was already carrying herself like an adult? Would that be Eloise in nine years?

Whoa. Pump the brakes there, me. Watching Daria’s girls grow up was as close to parenthood and wishing they’d stay young a little longer as I wanted to get.

“Are you going to tell me now what the plan is for tonight?” I asked as we headed out.

Daria shook head. “Nope.”

“I’m going to find out when we get there.”

“You’re right. You are,” Daria said.

Brooke and Adam joined us in the resort lobby, and I asked the concierge to call us two cabs. We weren’t all going to fit in one.

They never stop watching you. Daria’s words echoed in my mind. That was Adam with Brooke. He gave her his full and undivided attention, and the best way I could think of to describe the way he watched her was *unending worship*.

Not what I had. Not what I’d ever wanted. That meant a kind of commitment that I’d sworn I’d never get sucked into again. Not after Curtis.

So why did it sound so tempting tonight? Why was I almost as green as my dress with envy, watching Brooke with

Adam?

Because I was in an *I'm old* kind of contemplative mood. Daria was right about one thing—I needed to snap out of this.

We grabbed our rides, and Daria gave our driver a name I didn't know. A short while later we pulled up in front of a stucco building that was covered with vines and flowers. We stepped under an awning of terracotta tiles, to find Diego, Raul, and Eloise waiting for us.

The three of them were the perfect little family. And it made my heart ache.

But I wasn't going to lose myself in thoughts like that.

After a round of greetings, Raul said we should follow him. As we did exactly that, Daria leaned in closer to me. "If you love it, this was all my idea, and if you don't, he insisted on arranging everything." She spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

Raul glanced back at us with a smirk. "It was really nothing. The least we could do for our favorite project manager."

We stepped through a set of double doors and onto a back patio, and I stalled as I tried to take it all in. It was like stepping into another world. One of green, and classic-but-hidden architecture, and was that the sound of a stream?

"Fake stars." Harmony pointed up. "Pretty."

Sure enough, strands of lights ran above our heads, providing most of the illumination. The space looked big enough for multiple parties, but there was just a single long table for ten in the middle of it all.

It was beautiful.

“The family who owns the place has a long history with Raul’s family,” Diego said. “He called in a favor or three.”

For me. He’d arranged this for me. What was I supposed to do with that?

“Come see the water.” Eloise grabbed Harmony’s hand and tugged her toward a pond sitting at the edge of the clearing.

“Stay in sight,” Daria and Diego called at the same time.

I was so glad I didn’t have to worry about things like that.

No, really, I was.

A young man barely older than Alana came around to take our drink orders, and she was instantly prim and smiling and not bored. Daria did stop her from ordering the wine though, regardless of the waiter’s insistence that *it’s okay here. No one will mind.*

Nope, I didn’t envy parenthood at all.

The *antipasto* arrived shortly after our drinks, despite us not having ordered. Raul told us the entire evening was taken care of, at the chef’s insistence, but promised I would love it.

The defiant part of me wanted to prove him wrong, but the gesture was so sweet that I couldn’t argue.

We all took our seats, and it was impossible to miss the way Daria maneuvered *the birthday girl* to sit between Raul and Diego. Eloise started to argue, but Diego let her sit on his other side, next to Harmony, and that made her happy.

“Adam, Raul has something for you,” Diego said as we all nibbled on the cheese and olive tray.

Raul rolled his eyes, but reached inside his suit coat anyway. “I’m hoping you’ll appreciate this more than my

uncultured husband does.” He extracted what looked like a DVD case and handed it to Adam.

“My lack of appreciation is because I *am* cultured.” Diego’s counter was playful.

Adam took the gift, and his eyes grew wide as he studied it. “Is this signature real?”

Raul nodded. “My uncle knows the director.”

“What is it?” Brooke leaned her head in.

“It’s called *Star Odyssey*,” Diego said. “Worst. Star Wars knock-off. Ever.”

“You mean *best*.” Was Adam petting the case?

Raul lightly elbowed Diego. “I told you so.”

“*Hey*.” Brooke wrapped her hands around Adam’s arm and leaned into him. “Mine. You can’t have him.”

Daria shot me a knowing look as she said, “Don’t worry. Pretty sure they’re interested in someone else.”

This was exactly the kind of teasing I was known for dishing out, and it turned out I wasn’t a fan when it was directed back at me. “Love the wine.” I took a long swallow. “Do you think I could get a bottle back home without it breaking?”

Diego frowned.

Raul sucked in a sharp breath. “Unlikely. But if anyone could pull it off, it’s you.”

The fun continued through dinner, which was amazing. And just as incredible was watching how well Diego and Raul got along with my friends. I could picture them hitting it off just as easily with Megan and Jeremy.

And now I was daydreaming about introducing them to my family. But that wasn't weird, right? I'd met Raul's mother.

Totally not weird. My picturing them in other parts of my life, and me in theirs.

The entire evening was spectacular, but when Harmony and Eloise both started sulking and yawning, it was time to call it a night.

We were all saying our *goodbyes* when Eloise grabbed my hand and refused to let go. "You can't go. You have to come home with us."

"Carly doesn't live with us." Raul's retort was kind but firm.

"Why not?" Eloise stomped her foot and pouted. "I want Carly to come home with us."

Daria leaned closer to me. "It's your birthday." Her whisper barely reached my ears. "You don't turn down two smoking hot younger men on your birthday."

"It's up to Carly," Diego said to Eloise. "We can't make her come home with us if she doesn't want to."

Was he serious?

Eloise looked up at me with wide eyes and a quivering bottom lip. "Please?"

I should be bothered that Diego put this decision on me with Eloise listening, but I didn't want to turn them down. Not hurting her feelings was a great excuse to say *yes*.

Raul grabbed my hand before I could answer. "I need to borrow Carly for a moment." He led me back from the group a few feet, closer to the water. "If you say *yes*, no sneaking out in the middle of the night."

“I have to leave at some point.” I hated the words more than I expected. “It’s not as though I’m coming back tomorrow night.”

“I know. But give me the promise anyway, for both of them.”

Not for you or me? The question died on my lips. Of course not for us. We knew what this was, and there was no reason to deny it. “I promise. I won’t sneak out in the middle of the night tonight.”

“Thank you.” Raul squeezed my fingers.

We returned to the Diego and Eloise, and at my *Yes*, she cheered

Which warmed me in a way I didn’t want to admit.

My friends from home went their way, and I left with Raul, Diego, and Eloise. She kept hold of my hand most of the way home, and when we reached their apartment, she wanted to show me everything.

“Ellie, it’s bedtime.” Raul told her.

The child’s pout only lasted for a second, before she grabbed my hand again and pulled me toward her bedroom. “You can tuck me in, and read me a story, and give me a good night kiss, like a real mommy does.”

Was that my heart cracking in my chest? Why was this all hitting me so hard tonight? Like this entire arrangement, my being here now, was the best thing that could’ve happened to me. Where did this feeling come from?

Regardless, I couldn’t shake it. It was my birthday, I was feeling contemplative, and that seemed like a good excuse to just go with things for the night.

Besides, this would be the last time I did any of this. The last time I made sure Eloise was content at bedtime, and snuck off to her daddies' bedroom to do naughty things, and woke up at their place the next morning.

The last time.

I might as well enjoy all of it.

When Eloise was safe in bed and satisfied with her story, Diego led me to the other side of the apartment. Raul waited in their room, and the towels spread out on the bed tied my tummy into delicious knots.

“Thank you for tonight. It was like a fantasy birthday,” I said.

Diego cupped my cheek and the way he caught my gaze stole my breath. “There are plenty more where that came from.”

I didn't know how to interpret a promise like that. Or I didn't want to, I wasn't sure which.

He brushed his lips over mine, and a spark lit my soul on fire.

Raul glided his fingers lightly down my back. “You still need to unwrap your presents, though. And yes, I mean us.”

I could deflect by teasing him about using a line like that, but I liked it. I was pretty much a sucker for everything to do with these two men. There was one problem with his suggestion, though. “I don't know where to start. How am I supposed to pick?”

“Fair point.” Raul lay a row of light kisses along my shoulder, teasing the edge of my dress. “Maybe you should unwrap yourself, and we'll help with the rest.”

Diego drew a thumb along my bottom lip, drawing a gasp. “I’m not picky about who takes off what.” His voice slid into that low, growling tone that made me wet even without his touch. “As long as it all comes off and I get to taste you. *Christ*, I fantasize about tasting you again.”

Their voices. Their smiles. Their bodies...

I couldn’t fathom turning down any of it. Not tonight.

But as I unzipped my dress, my earlier insecurity slid back to taunt me. This kind of hesitation wasn’t like me, but tonight I was feeling the *I’m so old* pretty heavily.

The way both men watched me helped me push aside self-doubt. Diego bit his bottom lip when I let my dress slip to the ground.

Hello, sexy.

Their clothes fell away as well, until the three of us were naked in the middle of their room. I didn’t have time to think about *what next* before Raul was pressed against my back and Diego was tracing teasing lines along my skin, pausing to kiss a spot every few touches.

With attention like this it was easy to forget I was older. They were younger. This was probably the last time I’d be with th—

Nope. Not going there. This was my birthday, and I was going to enjoy the fuck out of tonight. Out of them.

Diego pressed his lips to the hollow at the base of my throat, then kissed a trail up to my ear, to catch my earlobe between his teeth. “We have more of a present for you than just orgasms.” His voice sent goosebumps racing over me. “Lay on the bed on your stomach.”

I nodded, too giddy, too much electricity humming around us, for me to speak. A moment after I complied, something warm and liquid hit my upper back, followed by a whiff of lavender. Massage oil? A second pool landed on my calf, near my ankle.

Diego kneaded his fingers into my shoulders, and I let out a long groan of pained relief with that first deep touch. None of us spoke. I was afraid if I did, I'd ruin the calm that had settled into the room.

Diego continued to rub and work at the muscles along my back, while Raul inched his way up my legs. I got the impression from the time and attention they put into each new area that they did this for each other. And now I was a part of it. The realization combined with their skilled fingers made moisture pool between my legs.

But the massage was also so relaxing, it was lulling my eyes shut. Tugging me gently toward sleep. The biggest thing keeping me conscious was both men working their way toward my core.

They didn't touch my wet, aching pussy, though Raul spent more time kneading my ass than maybe I needed.

"You still awake?" Raul asked.

I nodded. "Mhm."

"Roll onto your back."

I complied without hesitation. The pleasant cloud that wrapped around us was something I had no interest in peeling away. Watching Diego drizzle the warm oil onto my breasts was as good as feeling it, especially with the way he was so focused on me.

He handed the bottle to Raul, who applied just as liberal a dose to my thighs.

This wasn't a deep tissue, knead-out-the-tension-in-the-muscles massage. Diego focused solely on my breasts, his hands slipping easily over my skin as he teased the sensitive flesh and pinched my nipples.

Raul worked his way along my legs, but it didn't take long before he was slipping between my legs. Finally.

I whimpered when his fingers brushed along my slick pussy, and when he parted my folds, a light cry slipped from my throat.

The anticipation had been good, but the payoff was far better.

Raul dipped into my opening, and I arched my back at the penetration. His smirk said he was pleased with himself, for eliciting so many reactions.

He should be.

He moved his touch back up to my clit, and focused on the aching, swollen nub, while Diego continued to slip over, and squeeze, my nipples.

Orgasm built quickly, thanks to the double helping of worship, and I gripped the towels and sheets in my fists when I came. Waves of pleasure crashed around me. Neither man let up until my body was shuddering from too much.

And then they were taking turns kissing me. Kissing each other. Devouring my mouth with nips and nibbles and swapping groans when Diego's lips met Raul's.

Diego settled next to me on the bed, one hand on my stomach, his fingers splayed and tapping a teasing rhythm.

“You’re so fucking stunning,” he said. “You glow brighter than any goddess, especially when you come.”

Heat flooded me. What was I supposed to say to that? “I thought the lines were Raul’s department.” I was going to deflect, apparently.

“That’s not a line. I’ve never meant anything more.”

Fuck me, I was on fire. He—they—could seduce me anytime.

But they couldn’t. Not again after tonight.

I shoved the traitorous thought away.

“I want you to ride me. So I can worship you.” Diego rolled onto his back and tugged me toward him. “I want to see you above me when I make you come—make you glow—again.”

I slipped easily around Diego’s hips as I straddled him. With the amount of oil they’d used, I’d probably be slipping easily on everything for a while.

Not that I was complaining.

I didn’t know when he’d rolled on a condom, but I was grateful there was no need to pause or discuss. It would be fun to draw this out, to tease them the way they’d teased me, but I was out of play. I lowered myself onto Diego, letting out a long moan as he penetrated me, driving in to the hilt.

Raul knelt beside us, and gripped his dick in his hand. The way he raked his gaze over us, he might as well have been giving me the full body massage again. “You two are gorgeous when you fuck.” His voice was a low growl. “Definitely makes me a fan of watching.” He knotted his fingers in my hair and yanked as he leaned in to crush his mouth to mine.

When Raul let me go, Diego gripped my thighs and rocked gently inside me. The slow gyration was nice. Playful.

Nice wasn't on my list tonight. I set a faster pace, grinding against Diego. Heat pulsed inside every time he hit that sweet spot in me. Every time I caught sight of Raul stroking his cock while he watched us with a captive gaze.

I lost myself in the throes of pleasure, surrounded by warmth and adoration, and my body surged toward climax, but hovered right near the peak, refusing to take those last steps.

Diego slipped his hands up my legs, and pressed his thumb to my clit. He bumped in time with our frantic fucking, and another orgasm sped through me.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming his name. To keep the *oh, God, Diego*, from spilling from my throat and drifting out into the apartment.

A warm spurt hit my thigh, and I swore knowing that Raul was coming, that he was coating my leg, stretched out the orgasm.

I clenched around Diego, lost in the sensations. Devouring every touch and sound and scent.

He moved his hands back to my legs, squeezing tight. The desperation in his grip almost hurt, but in the best way possible. He grunted, his entire body shuddering as he jerked and spilled inside me.

I swore the sky opened and the angels sang at that peak of ecstasy for the three of us.

The edge faded off. We sloped away from the summit. Silence sank into the room. But that sensation of being wrapped in safety—wrapped in their affection—didn't fade.

I was so glad I promised Raul I would stay, because this was exactly where I wanted to be. I couldn't imagine a more perfect birthday.

WAKING up wrapped up in Diego and Raul was too easy. Finding Eloise waiting for us in the kitchen, made me smile more broadly than I wanted. Knowing that she was coming to work with us a third day in a row was only hampered by the knowledge that it was because the men didn't trust leaving her here until they'd figured out what Isabella wanted.

Daria met us at the church with my own clothes in case I didn't want to wear Raul's sweats and T-shirt all day. In a way I did, but it was probably more appropriate for me to change.

Harmony wanted to stay with her new friend a third day in a row, and Eloise had nailed the *I'm going to beg until Daddy says yes*.

"Harmony is going home in a few days," Raul reminded them. "This is only temporary."

"We can have Zoom playdates, like Mommy does with work," Harmony said.

I swallowed my snicker, but it almost slipped out at the way Daria rolled her eyes.

"Don't you want to see any of the city?" Daria asked.

Harmony shrugged. "I've seen the hotel. And the church. And the restaurant. Those are part of Milan."

Precocious child. I loved it.

“It’s okay, I promise,” Ariana said. “They’re really well behaved together.”

Daria, Raul, and Diego relented. I couldn’t argue. Ariana had kept the girls out of the way so far, and I had no reason to believe it would be a problem today.

Daria left with Alana, to go do more touristy things, the girls went to play while Ariana watched them, and the men and I got to work.

We were halfway into the morning when we got a call that the tile we’d been hoping for was in early. The only catch was someone had to come pick it up *now*.

Diego grabbed a couple of guys from the crew doing light demo in one of the other rooms, and took them with him. On his way out, he told Eloise where he was going, and that Raul was still here if she needed him.

Which left Raul and I to work in silence. Most of what we were doing today didn’t require manual labor, so we were sitting at the table we’d set up for things like this, both of us on our laptops, clicking away at the keys without speaking.

He was working his way through applications and resumes—it was time to start hiring crew for this place—and I was updating budgets and timelines.

Until he said, “You should know something.”

“What’s up?” I shouldn’t have been so quick to ask. His tone and the sinking in my gut told me I might not want to hear this.

“Diego and Eloise—”

The sound of running, and Ariana bursting into the room, cut him off. She had Harmony with her, and both of them

looked like they were on the verge of tears.

“Eloise is gone,” Ariana said in a frantic tone that ended in a sob.

raul

I WOULD'VE BEEN furious if I weren't busy fighting off panic at hearing the words from my worst nightmares. "What do you mean *gone*?"

"I'm so sorry. I only turned my back for a second, hand to Christ. The girls were playing, and I looked again and she was gone. I've looked everywhere, but... God, I'm so sorry." Ariana's explanation tumbled out in a rush of Italian and fear.

Shouting at her wouldn't solve anything, as much as I needed an outlet. "We need to— *look again*— call the police— *get her back*— call Diego." I couldn't grasp a thought long enough to even speak in one language.

"Harmony, hon." Carly's voice was soothing. Maddeningly calm. She crouched in front of the girl. "Did you see where Eloise went?"

Harmony started to cry. "I'm sorry," she wailed.

I bit the side of my fist to keep my frustration from escaping. Losing control was one thing I shouldn't do.

"Sweetie." Carly knelt in front of Harmony. "It's okay sweetie. You didn't do anything wrong. Did you see where Eloise went?"

Harmony kept crying, but within moments, Carly had calmed her down.

Too bad I had other things on my mind, or I might be impressed.

“Did you see where Eloise went?” Carly asked again.

I held my breath when Harmony nodded.

“He had pictures on his sleeves.”

Joystick. I showed her my tattoo sleeve. “Like this?”

“Kind of.” Harmony wrinkled her nose. “And he talked like me and Carly.”

As in, he spoke English? Definitely the man who was with Isabella the other day. “*Ariana, call the police.*” I already had my phone out and was listening to Diego’s line ring.

“Hey. What’s up?” Fortunately he picked up quickly.

I forced my thoughts into enough of a straight line to form a complete sentence. “Before I start, promise me you’ll let me finish before you cut me off.”

“Raul?”

I dragged in a deep breath through my nose. “Eloise is missing, and I think Isabella has her.”

“What?” Diego’s shout echoed in my ear, and I didn’t blame him. “I’m on my way there now.”

“*Police will be here soon,*” Ariana said behind me.

I relayed the message to Diego.

“Maybe don’t send them this way immediately, in case I need to wash blood off my hands.” Diego’s laugh fell flat.

I didn't have to ask to confirm he was only half joking. "Sitting in prison for kidnapping, losing her means to travel, will hurt her a lot worse. And if the news gets out..." Her precious career would crash.

"I'm heading over there now." Diego hung up.

I wanted to be there to meet him, but I also needed to be here to keep looking for our baby girl.

When I disconnected with Diego, Carly was on the phone, it sounded like Daria based on what she was saying. Harmony clung to her hand and had all-but attached herself to Carly's leg.

That should be Eloise. Holding on tightly. Dragging Carly into another room to see whatever she'd made. Not missing.

I stopped the work crews for the day. We couldn't have them here while this was going on, but I didn't let them leave in case anyone saw anything. Most of them were happy to help look for Eloise while we waited for the police, but there was still no sign of her.

My focus was shot when the police did finally arrive. I gave them distracted answers about Eloise's mother. Sent them dozens of pictures of our daughter, to make it easier to look for her. The only thing that kept me from decking the officer who implied this might be my fault, was that I needed all of their help.

Diego still hadn't called me back. The police were on their way to Isabella's hotel to talk to her. They set up a widening perimeter search around our building. I called Antonio, who of course couldn't do anything but offer to help search.

What good was it having family connections if I couldn't call in useful favors when I needed them the most?

I'd tear down the neighborhood, the country, burn down the world, to get my daughter back. And if Isabella or anyone hurt her, I'd tear them apart with my bare hands.

diego

I HAMMERED on Isabella's hotel door with the side of my fist until she opened up.

“Diego. What are you—”

I shoved into the room the instant she had the door open enough for me to put weight into it. “Where is she?”

“Who? Diego. What the fuck?” Isabella's anger had nothing on the rage coursing through me.

The room wasn't the fancy suite I expected, based on what I knew about Isabella. This was a simple space. A bathroom, kitchenette, and two beds. Good. Easier to search. “Eloise? Where are you, sweetie?” I called.

“She's not here, you psycho.” Joystick stepped in my path, fury flashing across his face. It was hard to take him seriously in the ridiculous Hawaiian shirt he was wearing. “Because *you* won't let Isabella see her.”

I clenched my jaw, and his shirt in my fist, and shoved him into the wall. He hit the structure hard enough to rattle the bolted down paintings. “I'm told you're the one who took her. If one hair on her head is out of place.”

“She's not here. No one took her.” Joystick shoved me back.

I growled. “*Someone* took her. Is she in the next room? Where the fuck is she?” I swung at Joystick’s gut.

He doubled over with a grunt.

“*Diego.*” Isabella’s voice was loud and shrill. “She’s not here. We didn’t take her.”

I whirled on her, my rage making red dance at the edges of my vision. “Convince me. Because if you had *anything* to do with this, the strings we’ll pull to make the rest of your life miserable... Prison will be the worst of your problems. I will personally ensure your existence becomes a living Hell.” I didn’t know if Raul’s family had connections *that* deep, but I’d make it happen somehow.

Isabella’s anger faded to fear. “I swear it. I don’t know what happened to Eloise.”

“Not convinced.” I wasn’t buying the bullshit front. She’d never been a great actress.

“Why would I take her?” Isabella asked. “I walked away for a reason.”

Joystick’s expression went slack. “What?”

“Then why the fuck are you back?” I wouldn’t be distracted.

“I— I just wanted to see her. To see what she’d become. Then I was going... I just wanted to see her.”

Wow. If that wasn’t the most obvious lie ever... I raised myself up to full height, and let the force of my fury spill out. “Tell me the truth.” I looked terrifying right now, and sounded scarier. I didn’t need a mirror to tell me that was true.

“Bella. His daughter is missing. *Your* daughter. Tell him anything you know.” Joystick’s tone was forceful.

She looked between us, brow furrowed. “I swear to Christ I don’t know where she is. I don’t fucking want her. I’m only here for Raul’s family. Their connections. I need investors for my next film.”

“*What?*” Joystick’s shout matched my own disbelief.

The answer made me sick, but it was the most real thing I’d heard come out of her mouth since she showed up in our lives again. “You’re fucking disgusting.” I spat. “If you come near any of us ever again...” I left the threat to hang in the air and turned away. Waste of fucking time.

“How could you say that about your own child?” Joystick’s furious question faded behind me as I walked down the hotel room hallway.

I needed to get back to the restaurant. My phone was in my hand to call Raul when Joystick caught up to me.

“I had no idea,” he said.

“I don’t care.” There were more important things to worry about.

“Let me help look for her.”

I couldn’t turn that down. The more people searching the better. “Suit yourself.”

I called Raul to tell him I hadn’t had any luck, and that I was on my way back. My heart sank to hear him say they hadn’t found anything either.

Joystick caught a ride with me, and was blissfully silent the entire time. Regardless of his real reasons for doing this, I was grateful for the help, and at the same time might snap if he said anything wrong.

When we reached the church, I had to argue with the police for a few minutes, and wait for them to go get Raul, before they let me in. Carly's friends had come back while I was gone. Daria was sitting with Harmony, and Raul told me everyone else was out searching.

Raul was updating me, and his stress and frustration radiated and amplified my own.

"*Mommy.*" Harmony's yell startled us. She was pulling on Daria's sleeve.

Daria turned to her. "What, hon?" Even her tension was audible.

All these people we didn't know, here in our time of crisis. I'd be grateful for them when it was over.

"He's like the man Eloise went with." Harmony pointed at Joystick.

He held up his hands. "I didn't take her. I swear."

"His tattoos, right?" Raul asked.

Harmony shook her head rapidly. "No. It wasn't him. It was someone *like* him. Like his shirt, with all the pictures on it. But all the way down his arms."

Realization spread through me, and Carly's mutters of, "No. No, no, no," reinforced the revelation.

I looked at her. "Would he?"

"Kidnap a little girl? I wish I could say *no*, but..."

I grabbed her arm. "Let's go."

"Shouldn't you tell the police?" Joystick's question hit my back.

Raul said something to him, but Carly and I were too far away to hear it. I wasn't waiting for anyone. I had to know *now*. And if we did find Eloise with Curtis, odds were high that he wasn't walking out of there.

early

IF CURTIS HAD TOUCHED a single hair on Eloise's head, I'd hold him down while Diego beat him, I didn't care how much bigger than me Curtis was.

"His office or his hotel?" Diego asked as we climbed into his car.

I'd be offended if he thought I might know, but now wasn't the time for anything but going. No thinking. No feeling. We just had to get this done. "Office."

I had no idea why that was my answer, and the entire way there, I fluctuated between that and *home* in my head, but I didn't share the doubts with Diego. We needed to pick a single direction, not waver.

Curtis's office was in one of those shared workspaces, where anyone could reserve a room or a desk. When we stepped inside, Diego seemed to know exactly where we were going, so I followed. The woman at reception tried to stop us—I caught something about *you don't belong here*—and we brushed past her without pausing.

He was in one of the individual offices, rather than the common working space, and when we pushed into the room, he was on the phone.

Eloise on the floor in the corner, playing with building blocks. My heart bounced that she looked okay. And when she looked up with a smile, I almost dared feel relief.

Not yet, but soon.

“Daddy. Carly.” Eloise grinned.

“I’ll have to call you back,” Curtis said to whomever was on the other end of the line.

I crouched and held out my arms. “Come here, sweetie.” I focused on Eloise.

She ran up to me and gave me a big hug, and I held her facing away from the room while Diego swung a fist at Curtis’s face, and connected with a sickening sound.

Fuck. Yes. I covered Eloise’s ears. “Were you having fun?” I asked softly. This might be a beautiful scene for me, but she didn’t need to see it.

“Listen, you fucking wanna-be—” Curtis looked furious.

Diego punched him again, this time in the stomach.

“I just wanted to talk to Car—”

Diego grabbed Curtis by the shoulders, cutting him off, and drove a knee into his groin. Curtis grunted and dropped to his knees.

“*Nobody move.*” Police burst into the room.

It didn’t matter if I’d understood the words or not, their tone was indication enough. I should be grateful they got here so quickly after us, rather than wishing Diego had a few more minutes to pound on Curtis.

Diego held his hands in the air and stepped back from Curtis.

“He’s her father,” I said.

The next few hours passed in a blur. Confirming Eloise was safe, and Curtis was the one who took her, answering questions for the police. Watching Diego and Raul wrap Eloise in their arms and being pretty sure they weren’t letting her out of their sight for a while.

Sitting in the midst of it all as one specific and harsh reality sank in. This was all my fault.

As the longest day in the history of days wound down, Diego and Raul were finally able to take Eloise and go home. Daria had sent her girls back to the cottages with Brooke and Adam, and waited for me.

I was both grateful to have her here, and feeling completely unworthy of the consideration.

We didn’t say anything on the ride back. When we stopped by the place Brooke was staying, Daria’s girls were happy to see her, and an ache grew in my chest at the overall vibe in the air. That closeness and kind of family feeling I didn’t even have with my siblings. Megan, Jeremy, and I were close, but Daria, Harmony, and Alana *needed* each other.

Harmony was a bundle of energy when we got back to our place. “Can we do this again tomorrow?”

Daria shook her head. “No, hon. We can’t.”

Please, God, never again. *Please.*

“Do your boyfriends know Donovan?” Alana’s question jarred me on multiple levels.

They’re not my boyfriends, the protest died in the back of my throat. “Who?”

“That’s why he looks familiar.” Daria puffed out a sigh. “The guy who came back with Diego was on a show years ago, when he was a kid. Donovan’s Wilde Ride. They still play the reruns.”

I never even thought to ask what Joystick was doing there. “Yeah, I don’t think they know him. He was... I don’t have any idea.” And honestly, it was the least of my concerns right now, what some former child-start wash out was doing first with Isabella and then with Diego.

“Come on guys, bedtime.” Daria ushered the girls toward their room.

I sank onto the couch, and tried not to play the entire day on repeat, to a steady beat of guilt.

I failed. The gnawing inside just kept chanting *your fault, your fault, your fault*. What if Eloise hadn’t been okay? What if—

“Are you all right?” Daria’s question drilled through my thoughts.

“Totally fine.” I couldn’t even summon the strength to fake a smile.

Daria sat next to me. “Are you sure?”

“*Totally*,” I repeated. “I mean, except for... What if this is my fault?” All of my doubts and guilt poured out in a long string of rambling brain vomit, and when I reached the end of the thoughts, I looped back to the beginning.

The hand on my leg startled me, and I looked up to see Daria watching me with concern on her face. “You can’t do that,” she said. “You can’t lose yourself in those kinds of doubts.”

Easier said than done. “I can’t not.”

“If you don’t pull away, this will devour you.” Daria’s voice was kind. Concerned. “I’ve played the *what if* game so many times with the girls’ safety, and you can’t. This wasn’t your fault. Curtis did this.”

I didn’t deserve her worry. “Because of me.”

“Because he’s a Grade A asshole.”

“But—”

“No buts.” Daria talked over me. “I promise you, as hard as it is to believe right now, you need to not fall into that hole. It won’t help anyone. Not you, and not Eloise.”

The name made my insides clench again, and tears pricked my eyelids. “I guess.”

“You’ll get there.” Daria squeezed my knee. “Try to get some sleep?”

I nodded. But sleep wasn’t my friend that night. When I did manage to doze off, it was to a cascade of nightmare scenarios in dream form, and every single time it was my fault.

I gave up around four in the morning, and forced myself to wait until after six before calling Raul.

“*Ciao.*” He sounded more exhausted than I felt when he answered the phone.

“Did I wake you?”

His laugh was sharp and bitter. “No.”

“I wanted”—needed—“to check and make sure Eloise was all right.”

This time his sigh was soft. “She seems fine. She slept in our bed, but as far as I can tell, she thought she was playing at

your friend's work all day."

My friend. The words nauseated me. "How about the two of you?"

"We'll be having nightmares for a while," Raul said.

Yeah. I knew what that was like. "I'm sorry." I bit the inside of my cheek to keep my voice from cracking. "I didn't know he would—"

"It's not your fault." Raul's assurance came quickly.

That didn't make me believe it any more than I already did. "You should both take the day. I have everything under control at the church, and I can keep them on track. Take the time with your family."

There was a pause, and for a moment I thought Raul might argue. He just said, "Thank you."

I went through the motions when I got to the worksite, but fortunately everything ran smoothly. It seemed without Curtis trying to sabotage the project, we had a lot fewer errors.

So much of this was my fault. Daria was wrong. Me being involved with this project caused this problem, and threatened one of the sweetest souls in existence.

When I got back to my cottage that night, I politely shrugged off Daria's attempts to distract me, slipped in my earbuds, and spent the evening writing up instructions for Diego and Raul.

I saved the message as a draft, nauseated both at the thought of sending it and the thought of having to sit on it any longer, and called Kandace. We exchanged pleasantries. I was grateful she didn't know about the events of the day, because I wasn't sure I could handle that kind of heavy conversation.

Not that I could avoid it. “I-can’t-stay-here-to-see-this-project-through-to-completion.” My words ran into a single blur as I forced them past my lips before I could hesitate.

“I— Oh.” Kandace went silent. The empty air stretched on longer than I cared for. “Is everything all right?”

“The project is fine. Fantastic. I should’ve said that up front. The guys are fantastic.” In fact, they were almost perfect. “But...” How much should I tell her? All of it. As little as possible. I had no idea.

“But what?”

I fiddled with the edge of my notebook, picking the corner of the cover until the layers of paper started to fray. I should’ve planned this call before I made it, but I needed to operate on momentum so I didn’t question everything I was doing. “My ex-husband approached them—Diego and Raul—after they pitched you but before the deal was final. He may have been interested in their project, but he’s also interested in my involvement in it. He’s already caused problems.” So many horrific scarring problems. “And my being here is making things worse.”

His being in jail would hopefully stop them, but we could have that part of the conversation when I got back to The States.

“Carly, I—”

“Daria can manage this one. I’ll give her whatever she needs. Work with her on all of it. The guys are good, and they can be trusted to work with a remote project manager. Please.” I didn’t mean that last word to come out sounding so desperate.

But I was.

“Okay.” Kandace sighed. “I trust you on this. Are you heading home in a few days then?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Oh. Wow. Okay. Well, we’ll talk when you get back. And Carly?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

I didn’t know how long until I would be. “Totally fine.” I hung up before she could question me further.

When I told Daria I was heading home with them, she just frowned. “Are you sure?”

No. Not even for a second. “I’ve never been more certain.”

“Okay.” She pulled me into a hug, and my heart fractured at her acceptance.

I sent the men an email the next morning, as I was waiting to board my plane. Thanked them for the great trip, told them again I was sorry, and said they could contact Kandace if they needed anything.

And I turned off my phone, so they couldn’t call me and protest. It was time for me to go home.

diego

I THANKED God over and over that Eloise was all right. In fact, she seemed better than all right—it was as if nothing had happened to her. I was pretty sure Raul and I wouldn't be sleeping well for a long time, though.

The day off was a blessing as well. We weren't ready to let Eloise out of our sight. Even the next day, we weren't willing to leave her with someone else. Raul agreed he could keep an eye on her during the day if she came to the worksite with us.

We discussed what to do with Ariana, and were torn. In the end we gave her the rest of the week off, but Eloise loved her, so we weren't ready to let her go.

When we got to the church, I was surprised that Carly wasn't already there.

Raul checked his phone, and frowned.

“What's wrong?” I couldn't handle anything else going off. Seriously.

“Email from Carly,” Raul said. “She's gone.”

I laughed. It wasn't a *funny* joke, but as a joke, it was better than focusing on the terror of losing our daughter, even for just a few hours.

“Where did she go?” Eloise asked.

Raul scrubbed his face. “Home.”

Fuck me. He was serious.

“No.” Eloise’s wail was heart-rending.

Raul crouched in front of her. “Carly didn’t live here. You knew that.” His voice was kind, but that didn’t stop me from hating that he had to say it.

“She didn’t even say goodbye.” Eloise pouted.

I ruffled her hair. “I know. Sometimes that happens. I’m sorry.”

Raul shot me a look that said he very much disagreed with my approach to this, but I wasn’t happy with his either. I held my tongue though. With the events of the last few days, there was no reason to add another stressor to our lives by starting an argument.

We pushed through work, making sure one of us was watching Eloise every second. Each new arrival or loud sound made us jump, and given we were on a construction site, that meant we spent most of the day on high alert. We managed to simultaneously work and be overprotective fathers, but by the time we got home, we were drained.

Dinner was quiet, as was most of the evening. We put Eloise in bed, and retired to the living room.

“Are you going to say it?” Raul asked in a low, cool voice.

I wasn’t sure what he meant. “Say what?”

“Whatever you’ve been holding back all day.”

Ah. That. “You could’ve been more kind when you told Eloise that Carly was gone.” The smart move would be to

leave things at that, but I was emotionally exhausted. “But you were just waiting for Carly to leave, weren’t you?”

The clench of Raul’s jaw said I’d pushed too hard, but I needed this out of the way. “No. I didn’t want her gone,” he said.

“Then how are you treating this, her leaving, what happened with her, like it’s nothing?”

“Because I don’t have a choice. *We* don’t have a choice. This was *always* going to be the way things ended, whether it happened today or a few weeks from now.” Raul’s voice never rose in volume, but the frustration cutting through his words matched my own.

“Do you really not want her in our lives? Do you not see ___”

“Of course I want Carly back,” Raul hissed. “I did see how good she was with Eloise. How incredible she was with us. But she’s a grown woman who has control of her own life, and that life isn’t here. A month with us doesn’t change that. Is she going to leave her family behind, her entire world, and move halfway around the globe, for a fling? Would you expect me to do that if she wanted us to move there?”

As long as it was me, Raul, and Eloise, that was all I wanted. I knew Raul’s family meant something to him though. “No,” I said. “I wouldn’t expect it. But I would at least ask you to consider if there was a middle ground.”

He sighed. “I... I get it. She’s gone. I don’t want her gone. But we don’t always get what we want.”

I tugged Raul close, and wrapped my arms around him as we sank onto the couch together. Fighting with him wouldn’t

change Carly's mind, and it was making me feel like shit. Why couldn't I have an answer for how to make this right?

THE NEXT FEW DAYS, we were no more willing to leave Eloise alone. We'd probably have to let her go back to school, when the time arrived, but how were we supposed to hand her over to anyone?

The weekend gave us time to spend time together, and just appreciate each other's company. I refused to let myself linger on thoughts like *Carly is missing out*.

Monday, we left Eloise with her Nonna, tried not to make too big a show about walking away, and headed to the worksite.

I wouldn't have let Eloise out of our sight, but interviews started today for kitchen staff, and I wasn't going to have her around dozens of strangers.

Around mid-morning, Joystick walked into the building. I was both surprised and apprehensive to see him. Had he made things right with Isabella? Was he here on her behalf? Was she really that ballsy, considering what she'd said to me last week? The questions had tension coiling through my entire body.

"Hey." He gave me a warm smile.

I wasn't prepared to offer the same in return. "What can I do for you?"

Raul must've seen him come in, because in an instant, he was by my side.

Joystick held up his hands, as if in surrender. "Not here for nefarious purposes. I just wanted to check on all of you, and

make sure you and your daughter were all right.”

“We’re good.” I clipped off the half-truth. For his purposes, for what he was asking, we were fine.

“I’m glad.” Joystick sounded sincere. “I can only imagine what you went through, and if I can do anything... And I’m sorry about Isabella. I’d known her for like, three days. Her *I need to see my daughter* sounded righteous. I didn’t realize.”

“You should’ve asked more questions,” Raul said.

Joystick shrugged. “Probably. The instant I found out who she was, why she was really here, I kicked her out of my room.” A hint of disgust bled into his voice. “Told her to lose my number and that if I ever saw her manipulative fucking face again... I let her fill in the rest. I’m absolutely disgusted that she’d do something like try to worm her way back into a child’s life for fucking connections.”

“Yeah. That’s Isabella.” I didn’t try to hide my distaste for our ex. Joystick on the other hand seemed all right. He radiated a genuine vibe, and despite being a stranger, he had been here helping us look for Eloise.

Joystick cast his gaze around the room. “What are you doing here? Restaurant, right? In an old church? That’s so wicked. How do you come up with an idea like that?”

Now he was asking questions. It was a nice distraction though. A hint of normalcy. “Raul bakes, I love historic architecture, it was a natural conclusion.”

“Heh.” Joystick scoffed. “Sure, okay. So, I like tattooed hotties, mature women, and video games. Natural assumption is that I should build a themed restaurant around it?”

Interesting conclusion to draw. I wasn’t sure what to say. “Not quite my point, but if you also like themed restaurants

and the idea of owning one, why not?”

“Dude, you guys are nuts. I love it. So, I’m gonna leave you to work. I figured I’m here, I might as well see the city. Any suggestions?”

No. Really. Who was this guy? “We can give you a list—local places and tourist traps. You flew to Milan without any sort of plan?” I said.

Joystick shrugged. “So I was at this party, and *God* I hate those Hollywood bullshit events, but a friend asked me to go, and then ditched me. I couldn’t even tell you how much I’d had to drink, but I was probably a tequila away from black-out something. This woman says *let’s go to Milan*, and when I woke up fourteen hours later, apparently we were almost here.”

“You don’t look too upset about the fact that Isabella—I assume—basically tricked you into coming here.” Raul’s puzzled expression was understandable.

“I was furious at first. But like I said, when I was soberish, she told me she was here to find her daughter, and you know the rest of the story.” The way Joystick explained things, he made it sound like a common occurrence in his life to just end up in a foreign country.

I couldn’t fathom being so spontaneous. Though, I’d do something like that for Raul. For Carly.

Raul and I gave Joystick a list of places to visit, and he was on his way.

Life returned mostly to normal. Or rather, as normal as could be when Raul and I jumped every time we had to leave Eloise alone, and with a person-sized hole that was impossible to ignore.

Around the end of the week, Raul got a call from a friend letting him know that Curtis had warrants in the US for fraud. There was some current discussion between the two countries about where he would do his time first.

As long as he stayed in jail for decades, I wasn't picky about where the cell was.

The following Monday, more than a week after Carly had gone home, she'd managed to direct all of our questions through someone else at her offices. Worse, Eloise was still asking every night if she was coming back.

I was surprised to see Joystick walk into the church again. He exchanged greetings with Raul and me. "I've been thinking about your suggestion," he said.

I stared at him, confused. "Which one? The sandwich place down the street?"

"Aw, man. I went there that first day, and I keep going back. Incredible." Joystick's face lit up. "But no. Your suggestion that I open a themed restaurant back home. I can't get the thought out of my head. You're right, I should do it."

"That's not how the conversation went," Raul said.

Joystick waved a hand. "You know what I learned growing up in Hollywood? When someone gives you credit for an amazing idea, you take it."

But was it really such a great idea? I hated to squash anyone's dreams...

"So, I want to hang out here. Learn from the two of you," Joystick said.

That sounded distracting at best. "We're not doing a lot of the restaurant work right now. This is mostly construction."

“Of a restaurant.” Joystick’s tone carried the perfect hint of *obviously*.

He was odd, but he was also friendly and fascinating. I could think of a dozen reasons to tell him no, some more polite than others, but there was something about him. “As long as you don’t get in the way, sure.”

Raul shrugged his agreement.

Having him here wasn’t the same as working side-by-side with Carly, and fuck I missed her.

But sooner or later, I needed to admit she wasn’t coming back.

Later, most likely. *Much* later. Because every time I even considered the notion, my heart revolted in such a way that the idea made me ill.

We needed her back.

How was I going to convince Raul and Carly of that?

raul

CONSTRUCTION WENT a lot more smoothly without someone trying to sabotage us at every turn.

Having Joystick on site wasn't nearly as distracting as I'd expected. Despite the air of chaos he radiated, he had a decent sense of humor and was willing to learn. Though part of me couldn't help but wonder if he was going to be here longer than Carly.

The first night Eloise didn't ask about her, the first night she went to bed without saying, *Will Carly come visit tomorrow?* was the night I swore my heart broke.

I missed Carly. So, so much. It hurt to admit it to myself, and it was impossible to tell Diego. What was I supposed to say? *Hey, I know I fought you on this, and I pushed her away as far as I could, but I want her back.*

It was morning—Tuesday, three weeks since Carly left, not that I was counting every minute—and I was sitting at one of my favorite cafes, with Antonio and Justin.

Justin was trying to explain the concept of keywords in internet advertising, and I was *not* following at all. The way his face lit up when he talked about this shit reminded me of

Diego trying to help me understand the significance of vaulted ceilings in cathedral construction.

I'd rather be perfecting a soufflé recipe... or drizzling honey over Carly while Diego and I— I was trying my best to be polite and listen.

“Where are you today?” Antonio’s question cut through my thoughts.

Maybe hot oil was better than honey. Not edible, but slippery... “Nowhere,” I said. “This stuff is just *way* over my head.”

Antonio studied me. “It feels like more than that.”

“It’s not.” Damn him and his perception.

“It’s the woman, isn’t it?” Justin asked. “Carly?”

What? “Why would you say that?” My question came out more defensively than I intended.

“I have a series of spiders that monitor who’s saying what about your family online.” If he wasn’t my cousin’s boyfriend and business partner, I was pretty sure that would translate to *I’m stalking your entire family*. “Have I told you about the importance of keywords?” Justin asked.

I raised an eyebrow. “Yes.”

He and Antonio laughed.

Fine. I’d play his game. “Okay, how do keywords tell you that Carly is the reason I’m distracted?”

“Fake marriage.” Justin ticked off a finger. “Everyone issued retractions but you and Diego.” Another finger went up. “Two months later, you still haven’t denied it.” Three fingers out.

He wasn't wrong, but I wasn't ready to admit it. "You said it yourself—it was fake. The first source got it right."

"Mhm." Justin looked unimpressed.

I wasn't going to argue with my cousin's boyfriend about internet keywords and whether or not anything anyone said online mattered. I sipped my coffee instead.

"If you miss her, why haven't you hopped on a plane to go get her?" Justin asked.

Sigh. The idea was so much more tempting than I wanted him to know. "First of all, I didn't say I missed her, and second because I'm not a fucking caveman. I don't go find a woman and hit her over the head and say *mine* before I drag her back to my cave."

"To each their own." Justin shrugged.

"Don't listen to his bullshit," Antonio said. "When he got here, he had to beg Emily and me to even listen to him. There was no cavemanning."

Justin rolled his eyes. "I didn't beg. I don't *beg*. You saw me because you can't keep your hands off me."

The story had been cute the first hundred times they told it. I wasn't in the mood for it today. "Keywords. Advertising. SEO. Got it." I pushed back from this table.

Antonio looked like he wanted to say something more, but instead we wished each other goodbye, and I headed to the church.

As much as I wanted to wipe the conversation, Justin's words, from my mind, I couldn't. The thing about Carly though, one of the things I adored about her, was that she

wouldn't be won over by a grand gesture like *I'm here, now, on your doorstep. Come back to Italy with me.*

She'd probably tease me and ask if that was the best line I had, and I'd counter with something far more witty, and we'd one-up each other verbally until we were either fake-fighting, or fucking.

God I missed her.

I headed back to the worksite, but I couldn't get Carly out of my head. Worse, I didn't know what to do about it.

Why haven't you hopped on a plane to go get her? Justin's question played on repeat in my mind, taunting me.

Because it wasn't that easy. Because my family—my husband, my daughter—were here. I could take them with me, but we barely trusted ourselves walking out of the house with Eloise. There was no way we'd survive the paranoia of flying her to the US.

And what the hell was I doing, even considering the ridiculous suggestion?

The thing was... At least that was *something*. Better than all of the thinking and nothing I was doing now.

Thoughts of Carly stayed with me through the workday. How much I enjoyed her company. How perfect she was with our family. How hard I'd fallen for her and didn't realize it until it was too late.

But I managed to make it through with my sanity intact, despite the one problem that had no solution except *get over it*. When we got home from work, we did all the normal things. Listened to Eloise tell us about her day. Made dinner. Read after. Tucked our baby girl in safe and sound.

The whole thing was so perfect as-is. I really did have an amazing life.

And knowing that didn't stop that frustrating tick in my head insisting something—someone—was missing.

When we got to our room at the end of the night, I was still no closer to either a solution to getting Carly back, or to pushing thoughts of her out of my head.

Diego slid up behind me, wrapped his arms around my waist, and rested his chin on my shoulder. “What has you distracted?” His question teased my neck.

I leaned into him and covered his hands with mine. If I told him, would I have to hear *I told you so*? It didn't matter. This needed to come out or it would drive me mad. “You were right. We need Carly in our lives.”

It's about time you figured it out.

Why didn't you see it sooner?

Now you realize...

I was certain that some variant of those would come out of Diego's mouth.

He pressed his lips to my cheek, and settled into the hug again. “We really do.”

Relief flowed through me, despite the lack of a solution. “What now?”

“We call her. We tell her.” Diego made it sound so simple.

And he was right. Again. The three of us had figured out some intense puzzles while Carly was here, and if we could do that, we could unravel a solution to all of us staying in each other's lives.

Except for one tiny little problem. “She’s not even showing up for work meetings. There’s no way she’s going to take our call. Unless...”

“What are you thinking?” Diego murmured against my skin.

I pulled away so I could face him. “Follow my lead?”

“Of course.”

I grabbed my phone and called Daria on speaker. She had become our contact with Carly gone, and while it was late here, it was the middle of the day for her.

She answered quickly. “Hey. You’re not still working, are you?”

Diego raised an eyebrow.

“No.” I assured her quickly. *Please let this be the right decision.* Daria had apologized on every phone meeting that she couldn’t get Carly to join, and while there had never been more than professional conversation, I swore more lay underneath. “I have a favor to ask, though,” I said.

“We’ve been over this—they’re not favors, they’re plan alterations,” Daria teased.

It has become clear lately why she and Carly were best friends.

“This is a favor.” Diego spoke up.

Now that we were doing this, every moment wasted was another moment too much. “Can you get Carly to talk to us?” I managed to make the request without rushing or fumbling over the words.

Daria’s silence was deafening.

“It’s not work related,” Diego said.

Would that make Daria more or less likely to listen to our request?

“All right.” When she finally responded, I let out a long exhale of relief. “I can send you over, and I can tell her she *has* to take the call. But I can’t make her keep you on the line.”

“That’s all we can ask. Thank you.” I’d say it over and over if it would help.

Daria clucked. “I’m going to transfer you now. Please don’t let her hang up on you.” Her request came out in a rush, and then we were on hold.

A moment later, the line clicked. “This is Carly Hammond, may I help you?” Even in full-blown professional mode, she sounded incredible.

“Hi. It’s Raul and Diego.” *We love you. Come back to Milan, please.* Maybe we’d do a little more small talk first.

“I know,” she said. Was that a hitch in her cool tone? “Daria can answer any questions you have. She knows this project as well as I do.”

But she didn’t. No disrespect to Daria, but Carly was intimately familiar with the details of our business.

“This isn’t about the restaurant,” Diego said.

This was taking too long. “We love you.” The words tumbled past my lips with no fanfare or warning. “We love you, and we miss you, and you need to come back to Milan so we can figure this out.”

If Daria’s silence had been disconcerting, it was nothing compared to the seconds of nothing that stretched out now. Why wasn’t Carly saying anything? Did she need to hear

more? I looked at Diego, trying to convey *what now* with my eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Carly’s response was like a knife through the heart. Two simple words, and I was dead. “I can’t. If you need help with the project, Daria can help.”

The line went dead.

early

I WAS BACK TO ME. Cool. Calculating. Professional. Removed. I didn't need anyone but my BFFs and my job.

So why was hanging up on Raul and Diego the hardest thing I'd ever done? Why did I want to call them back instead of bark at Daria to not do that to me again?

Why did cutting them out of my life feel like the second stupidest thing I'd ever done?

Marrying Curtis was still the first. Reigning champion of stupid. An idiocy I never wanted to top.

Fuck I missed Raul, Diego, and Eloise. Ignoring them hadn't diminished the memories. The doubt that leaving was the wrong thing to do. How long until I could get rid of these feelings?

I needed to embrace the single life. To celebrate it. To remind myself what I loved about not being tied down to one—or three—people. Not too long ago, that would mean hitting up the bar with Daria, or Megan, or—

It didn't matter because they were all in happy, sweet, lovey-dovey relationships now.

And I was annoyed by that, not jealous in any way. How dare they find people who were perfect for them?

Sigh.

I looked up as a shadow passed in front of me, to find one of the investment partners standing in front of my cubicle. Yeah, I was in the office, and had been far more than normal the last few weeks. I'd taken this job because I loved the travel. The fact that I could make my office anywhere.

And now doing so reminded me of working with Diego and Raul, and that sucked.

“Have we met?” Xander studied me, his brow furrowed. “I didn't know we were bringing anyone new on.” The teasing in his voice almost made me smile.

Almost. Instead I gave him a friendly scowl. “Knock it off.” If I didn't have a job where I could talk back to the senior partners, what was the point?

He shook his head. “I don't take orders from newbies.”

Asshole. And I meant that in the most affectionate way. “Do you take orders from the person who decides whether or not your next property is investment-worthy?”

“Carly. Oh my God, it's been so long.” Like that, Xander's tone shifted. “Can I get you a coffee? A muffin? A new Coach bag to match those amazing nails?”

I wiggled my gnawed-down nails in front of my own face, and looked between them and him. I usually got my nails done right after a job, because I tended to break and chip them while I was working. This time, I'd had other things—people—on my mind. “I'm good, thanks. What are you bribing me for?”

“It's kind of depressing seeing you mope around the office, and I have an early twentieth century school in New Hampshire that needs a look. You up for a two-day trip?”

I really wasn't, but he was asking me if I wanted to do my job. Hard to say *no* to that, no matter how casually we teased each other. "Sure." It might take my mind off things for a few days. Give me that distraction I was looking for. Let me hook up with someone new and nameless.

The last thought soured in my gut and sent acid surging up my throat.

Maybe not that one.

Our travel agency got me on a flight that afternoon, and I headed to the airport, happy for the distraction and a change in scenery.

Except that sitting at my gate reminded me of when I last did this to fly to Italy. The First Class upgrade was lonely, rather than decadent. My hotel room was the same. I'd slept alone most of my life, even in Milan, but tonight it didn't work for me.

Even exploring the old school the next day didn't brighten my mood the way I hoped. Every piece of classic architecture made me want to send Diego a picture and geek out with him. I wanted to hear Raul's thoughts on how he'd make a better garlic cream tortelloni at dinner. And when the girl at the next table started crying because her kid's menu gave her a paper cut, I wanted to hug her until she felt better, instead of asking for a different table.

But I did my job, I sent Xander an honest and positive evaluation for the school, and I flew home again.

The harder I tried to slide back into my old life, the more often I heard Raul's voice in my head. *We love you. Come back to Milan.*

Damn it.

By Friday night, I was going out of my mind. Why did they have to call me? Why did Raul have to say that? It was hard enough forgetting them before the *We love you*, but now...

So when Kandace told me her brother and his wife had taken her son camping for the weekend, and she wasn't sure how to spend her time, I was quick to jump on the chance for some company. "Come to the bar with me," I said.

Kandace's eyes grew wide. "Me?"

"Of course you. Girls' night. We'll ogle guys and get so drunk we can't think."

Her shock faded to a frown. "That sounds... fun?"

"I promise, it's more fun than you think." I was already calling an Uber to take us to a nearby bar. Our cars were safer parked at the offices overnight.

Two hours later, I was still nursing my first drink, while Kandace was on number four, and had started whistling at every man who walked by. It wasn't the kind of distraction I'd been looking for, but it was entertaining in its own way.

Still, I'd probably have to cut her off soon.

"Come here." Kandace crooked her finger and beckoned, while leaning in.

Definitely have to stop ordering drinks. "What's up?"

"I want to tell you a secret." Her words weren't slurred, but this wasn't the woman I worked for. She was more casual. More relaxed. "I. Am jealous. Of you."

Because I had an awesome single-woman's life with no attachments or real obligation.

Except I wasn't satisfied with that anymore. Because something was wrong with me.

"Why?" I asked, instead of dumping my thoughts on Kandace.

"Because you and Daria have such an amazing friendship."

Oh. Yeah, I was pretty lucky for that. "You can be our friend too."

"It's not the same. You're both so close." Kandace pouted. Fucking pouted.

It was too bad blackmail wasn't my thing. "It won't be the same at first, but all relationships take time. You start off liking each other. Spending time with each other. And then you learn more about each other, and want to spend even more time together, and then one day you realize your life isn't the same without them."

Fuck.

Kandace squinted at me and frowned. "That does sound pretty good. But I'm your boss."

"And you're an amazing boss. I have mad respect for you. We can still be friends."

Kandace twirled the stick in her nearly empty glass. "If we're friends, will you tell me a secret?"

She'd told me one, so that seemed fair. "Depends." I tried to keep my reply light and airy.

"Is there more than just a fake-wedding-for-headlines and the job between you and our handsome Italian restara... restronte... businessmen?"

Yes. Except *no*. I should deny that instantly. “You’re asking as my friend, not my boss?”

“I already said that.” The huff Kandace let out was full of offense.

“There was sex, too.” I had to be honest, right? Build trust. And also, in case it came out later, I hadn’t lied. The *there was so much more than that between us. There still is* made my brain stall in ways I didn’t like.

Kandace grinned. “*Nice*. Another thing I envy you for. Relationships are so easy for you.”

“They’re really not.” The words slipped out without my permission. “If they were, I wouldn’t run away from them all the time.” Okay, me, I could stop anytime now.

“But you don’t. Run away, I mean. You’ve been with us almost since the start. You’ve known Daria forever. You have friends everywhere. Those are relationships. Why haven’t you ever moved to Milan?”

What? “If we’re trading secrets, I feel like you owe me another one first.” I was deflecting because I didn’t have an answer. And what was it about this bar that was making my mind open up and question everything in my heart?

Kandace chewed her bottom lip. “I’ve-never-really-lived.” Her words rushed out in a blur. “I have a son who’s almost eighteen, who isn’t even mine, and I’m this big important name in investments, but if I died tomorrow, I wouldn’t have any *me* memories to take to heaven with me.”

That was a sobering thought. She might agree since she waved the waitress over for another drink.

“So, do something about it,” I said. It was much easier to push my advice on someone else than to take it myself.

“Move to Milan,” Kandace countered. “You’ve been saying you want to for years, and we’ve been thinking of opening an office in Europe. You’d be great to help us start things there. What’s stopping you from going?”

A dry laugh escaped my throat. “I’m scared.” Oh, wow. That hurt to say and was a relief at the same time. I didn’t fear anything. Except storms. And commitment. And someone saying they loved me when they were really just a narcissistic asshole who would do anything to get their way, including kidnap a little girl...

She pointed at me with finger guns. “Me too.”

“We should go.” I tugged her to her feet right as the waitress returned with her drink.

Kandace reached for the glass. “But... booze.”

I handed the waitress extra money. “Give that to someone else,” I said and turned to Kandace. “Finger guns is the point where you’re too drunk to be in public.”

Kandace scowled. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are.” I wrapped an arm around her waist to support her, and guided her toward the door. “That’s why we’re leaving. Because if you’re going to embrace life, sober is better. You’ll want to remember the sex when you pick up the sexy tattooed guy for a one-night stand.”

“What if it’s bad sex?” Kandace asked.

It frequently was. But never with Raul and Diego. I swallowed the thought. “Then the best way to learn from the mistake is to remember.”

I called us a ride, and since I wasn’t actually drunk, had the driver take us to my car. I dropped Kandace off at home, then

headed to my own place.

The ridiculous conversation played in my head all night, mingled with the short phone call from Diego and Raul. The one where I hung up on them. The one where I ignored their confession of love and pretended like I was a stone-cold bitch who didn't care.

Why couldn't I be that person?

Why was this so terrifying?

What if I moved to Milan and they didn't want me?

What if no one since Curtis had wanted me because I wasn't wantable?

When the last question dropped into my head, I hated it. I loathed that I could even think such a thing. Yet, the question wouldn't leave me alone.

diego

OUR FIRST RESTAURANT, our church restoration and revival, had gone amazingly well. We were done under schedule and budget, and the building looked incredible. Tonight we were celebrating with friends and family, a sort of dry-run grand opening mixed with a way to show the place off to those closest to us.

Raul and I were dressed in tuxes, and Eloise had a new dress that she couldn't wait to show off to everyone.

Really, it was all so close to perfect.

Except that one missing element. That one missing person.

Without Carly here, it wasn't the same. I wouldn't let her missing presence spoil the evening, she'd made her choice, but I missed her terribly. It was going to be a long time before the ache attached to her name faded.

Raul, Eloise, and I arrived at the restaurant early, to make sure everything was in order. He'd be spending most of the pre-dinner time in the kitchen, but would join us for the main course, and our staff would handle the rest. Nerve-wracking, but we had spent so long working toward this, and tonight was one of the payoffs.

I greeted our guests with Eloise's hand gripped tightly in mine. It had been a month since the incident, not nearly long enough to relax.

Joystick arrived, and we spent a little time talking. He'd been hanging out with us most days on the worksite, asking questions, helping wherever we let him, and taking copious notes. He had an idea that Raul called the Buckaroo Banzai of restaurants—it was a little bit of all of Joystick's favorite things thrown into one concept—and it was over the top enough that it would either crash and burn or be wildly successful.

I was leaning toward the latter.

“Fuck me. Who's that?” he muttered.

I would've scowled at him for using the language in front of Eloise, but when I followed his gaze, my mind snagged, and the world stopped. Carly had just walked in. Her hair tumbled in soft ringlets around the gauzy fabric on her shoulders, and her black gown teased at what lay underneath.

“Daddy, she looks like a princess.” Eloise's awe snapped me back to reality.

One where Carly was still standing in our restaurant again, and she wasn't a princess, she was a fucking queen. *Our* queen. When her gaze met mine, a soft smile spread over her face, and that was it. I was lost to her.

Also, I was going to deck Joystick if he was drooling over her. No way around that, it was what it was.

But Carly wasn't alone, and Joystick had walked away from us to introduce himself to Kandace, who looked surprised and vaguely flustered at the well-dressed, tattooed man who had just greeted her.

I was going to kiss Carly in front of this entire room full of people. Near the doorway, for everyone to see. I was going to press her against the wall and sear her memory into my mind, to confirm she was actually here, and I didn't care who saw.

“Daddy, let's *go*.” Eloise broke away from me before I could act, and ran across the room. “*Carly*,” she shouted.

Carly crouched as Ellie reached her, and when the two hugged, my heart was broken and mended again and again. It landed on healed and warm.

“You look really pretty,” Eloise said.

Carly pulled back enough to ruffle her hair. “So do you.”

“I thought you weren't coming back.” Eloise's words echoed what I wanted to say.

Carly kissed her on the forehead, and looked past her to me again. “Me too. But I was wrong.”

I had no words. I wanted to pull Carly into my arms and kiss her for ages. Bend her over the closest table and fuck her until she screamed. Cuddle her. Never let her go.

And the chatter of the crowd around us might not have been enough to stop me if Eloise weren't here.

Carly grabbed Ellie's hand and stood, never taking her eyes off me. “I need to talk to you and Raul,” she said.

Definitely. Talk. More. “How long are you here for?”

“That's what I want to talk about.”

No. I wasn't having that kind of vague, bullshit evasion. “That's not an answer.”

“For as long as you'll have me. Is that a better answer?” Carly's reply was breathless and one of the most incredible

things I'd ever heard.

"We need to talk to Raul." I wanted to have the conversation now, but he deserved to be there for whatever she had to say.

Eloise grabbed Carly's hand as tightly as she'd held mine earlier. "Are you having dinner with us, Carly?"

"If your dads will have me."

I dipped my head near her ear and inhaled deeply, filling my head with the scent of jasmine and anticipation. "In as many ways as you'll let us." My whisper was only for her ears.

And the flush that spread through her cheeks was incredible.

I straightened up. "Yes, she is." I answered Eloise's question. "But Carly and I need to talk to Daddy first, and you can't be in the kitchen while it's this busy. Let's go find Nonna." I paused, and looked between Kandace and Carly. "Do we need to rescue her?" I asked.

Carly glanced over at Kandace, who was talking to Joystick. The other woman didn't look upset or bothered, but mostly flustered. Carly smirked. "She'll be fine."

We left Eloise with Raul's mother, and went to find him in the kitchen. The instant I had Carly in a quiet hallway, no one else around, I pressed her to the wall with my full body.

Her gasp and giggle sent flames roaring through me. I crushed my mouth to hers, swallowing the delicious sounds and memorizing the shape of her mouth; the feeling of her soft lips, her taste, and her whimpers.

When I finally broke away, it was to her happy sigh. I pressed my forehead to hers and muttered, “Fuck, I missed you.”

“I missed you too. Both of you. I’m sorry. I was wrong. I... would rather do this with both of you here.”

I grabbed her hand. “Same.” I tugged her the rest of the way toward the kitchen, and had her wait in the doorway, out of the way of the staff.

Raul had his back to us when I approached, and when I tapped him on the shoulder, he barked, “What?” He spun, and his gaze landed on something—someone—behind me. “Back in five,” he shouted to his staff, and was already walking toward Carly.

When we reached her again, he did exactly what I’d wanted to do when I saw her again—he cupped her face between his palms and kissed her hard. Watching them was as good as doing that myself.

Raul stepped back with a scowl. “Not that you deserve that, after leaving without telling Eloise *goodbye*.”

“I know.” Carly nodded. “Hear me out before you kick me out.”

We weren’t kicking her out.

Raul glanced at his watch. “You have four minutes, thirty seconds.”

“I’m sorry.” Carly pushed the words out in a rush. “I’m sorry I left without telling you to your faces. I’m sorry I left at all. I was scared of falling and not being loved back.” Her voice trailed off with the last few words, and she ducked her head.

“You knew we loved you. We told you,” Raul said.

My dry smile slipped out. “He didn’t figure it out until you were gone, so don’t let him give you too hard a time.”

“I’ll give you all the hard you want.” Raul’s line didn’t have the oomph it should.

A corner of Carly’s mouth tugged up. “I don’t know if it’s too late to say it back, but I love you too. Both of you. So much it scares me, apparently.”

I placed a finger under her chin and tilted her head up, so I could stare into her stunning eyes. “It’s not too late. It’s very much not too late.”

“Two days from now, though...” Raul finished with a cluck.

I shot him a warning look.

“I’m sincerely glad you’re here.” Raul’s voice finally softened. “But if you’re leaving again, I pray to God Eloise hasn’t seen you.”

“She has, and I’m not. I’m staying. Regardless of what you say next, I’m moving to Milan, because I’ve always wanted to live here, and to help The Raphael Group open a European office. But if you’ll have me, I’m staying in your lives, too.”

I mentally fist-pumped at the news, grasped Carly’s fingers, and kissed the tip of each one. “Of course we’ll have you. Always.”

“Fuck.” Raul scrubbed his face. “Don’t take this wrong—I’m happy you’re here—but this is the worst timing.” He glanced at his watch and back at his kitchen.

Carly kissed him on the cheek. “Go. Work. I wasn’t going to miss this party, and I’ll still be here when you’re done.”

He claimed her mouth in a brief-but-scorching kiss. “You’d better be.”

“Cross my heart.” Carly squeezed both of our hands, and then let go of Raul’s as he turned away.

I led her back to the dining room, we retrieved Eloise, and took our seat at the table at the front of the restaurant.

The twenty or so people here with us followed my lead and took spots at other tables, in groups of two to five.

Eloise regaled Carly with stories about everything that had happened while Carly was gone. With us, with her nonna, and with her building blocks. It was incredible to watch.

When Raul stepped into the room, I told Eloise to stay with Carly, and joined my husband, standing in front of everyone.

Our presence seemed to draw the entire room’s attention. Raul and I shared a look, and I gave him a brief nod and squeezed his hand.

He stepped forward. *“Thank you everyone, for coming.”* We’d have to translate for our American friends when we were done. *“We’ll make this brief, and then the first course will be served. This is something Diego and I have wanted for a long time, and we wouldn’t be here without support from all of you. We’re so very excited for this next part of our lives.”*

The sentiment of Raul’s words lodged in my chest, and clogged my throat with emotion. When he paused and looked at me, I didn’t have anything better to add, so I said, *“Enjoy your meal. This is the first of many.”*

I gave Raul a long, sweet kiss, to the applause of the room, and lightly smacked his ass as I sent him back to the kitchen.

When I returned to the table, Kandace and Joystick had joined us. The conversation was a combination of Eloise's stories and Joystick's as we worked our way through each course. Raul joined us when the main dish was served, but the topics didn't change much. I couldn't help but glance at Carly every few seconds, to make sure she was real and to confirm that she was here with us. But the company wasn't the kind where I could say the things to her I wanted to.

There was time, though. For now, we'd enjoy this success, this closeness with our entire family, and later we'd enjoy a different kind of closeness with Carly.

Because now that she was here, I was never letting her go. She belonged with us, all three of us, and nothing could feel more right than having her here tonight.

raul

I WAS PRACTICALLY giddy that Carly was here. Tonight. Longer. The way Eloise brightened up, and Diego's non-stop smile, made her being here even better.

The evening was a huge success. The food would've been better if I'd made it personally, but it was good, and the company—being surrounded by our friends and family like this—was amazing. Everyone was complimentary of both the building and the meal.

After dessert was served, as everyone was leaning back from the table and conversation was fading, Kandace leaned in. “The two of you—three of you—did a brilliant job. I can't wait to see you expand, and I knew working with you was the right decision.”

Of course it was. I'd save the ego for another time. “Thank you.”

“And on that note,” Kandace smiled and pushed her chair back, “I'm going to leave you for the night. Congratulations, gentlemen.”

“Hang on.” Joystick covered her hand where it rested on the table. “It's the perfect time of night for a teensy bit of sightseeing. Would you like to see something incredible?”

Carly covered her mouth, but I knew she was hiding her amusement because I was thinking the same thing; was he serious?

Joystick raised his brows, but he kept his attention on Kandace. “I’m serious. It’s touristy, but I think you’ll love it.”

“I don’t know...” Kandace hadn’t pulled her hand away.

I wouldn’t send our benefactor off with some random person, but spending the last few weeks with Joystick, I knew he was as sincere as he appeared. “He’s seen a lot since he got here, and he’s not as jaded as we are.”

“I’ll be here late tonight,” Carly added.

“I figured.” Kandace worried her bottom lip. “Okay, I’d love to.”

Joystick and Kandace’s departure was just the start. The remainder of our guests trickled out as well. When my mother came to collect Eloise for the night, since Raul and I had planned to stay late to oversee clean-up, Eloise turned to Carly.

“Will you be at my house in the morning?” Eloise asked.

When Carly said *yes*, my heart cheered as loudly as Ellie did. She gave Carly a hug, and ran to join her Nonna.

And then everyone else was gone except me, Diego, Carly, and the staff tasked with helping to clean-up. If we were home, I’d say *fuck it* and leave the rest of the mess for morning. But we weren’t, so I couldn’t.

“How can I help?” Carly asked.

Diego shook his head. “No. Not in that dress.”

“I could take it off,” she offered with a teasing smile.

Studying her, I pretended to consider the offer. “I do have an apron that you’d look incredible in, especially with nothing underneath... But no. We need everyone else doing their jobs. Your ass is for our pleasure only.”

“That came out *way* wrong.” Carly didn’t look bothered.

“But did it?” I asked.

That dry smile, the one that crinkled in the corners of her eyes and lit up her entire face, sent desire rolling through me. “Seriously though.” She ducked her head and her voice softened. “I’m sorry I left. Without finishing things, without talking to you... The place looks incredible. But I shouldn’t have— I never should’ve run away.”

Diego opened his mouth, and I gave him a gentle look.

“You weren’t ready to stay. I wasn’t ready for you to stay,” I said. “We had to figure it out.”

Carly nodded.

“I’m glad you both did.” Diego grasped our hands. “And that’s what I care about. That Carly is here now.”

Clean-up didn’t take too long, thanks to the staff and to Carly, who helped despite our protests, and a short while later, she and Diego and I were walking home.

Finally, we were alone. Not really, since the city still bustled around us, but close enough. With the cool night air brushing our skin, the high of being back together rushing through our veins, it was easy to let joy overtake us. Joy and lust.

Carly walked between us, Diego and I each clasping one of her hands. “Are you afraid I’ll run again?” She teased.

“No.” I squeezed, and she returned the gesture. “But *Christ* I need to touch you and I’ll take what I can get until we’re alone.”

“Same.” She leaned into me, seemed to bounce off my shoulder, and did the same to Diego until we pressed in closer, stopping the walking bobble.

I didn’t want to wait. I felt like I’d waited a lifetime for her, even though it had only been a month or so since we saw her last. The shadows ahead caught my eye and inspiration struck. As we neared a narrow alley between the butcher shop and the bakery, I veered toward it, tugging them along with me.

We didn’t make it far before Diego tugged Carly into him, her back to his front, settled his hands on her hips.

I stepped closer, sandwiching her between us, and rested a hand on her cheek. Wide, clear eyes stared back, amusement and lust sparkling in her gaze.

“This is what I wanted to do when I saw you.” I brushed my lips over hers, softly at first, then deepening the kiss. Sliding my tongue into her mouth to dance with hers. Crushing into her until all I could feel was her body pressed against mine and the heat that flowed between us.

This was a connection I’d only ever felt with Diego, but it was Carly-flavored. Smart. Witty. Strong. Experienced. And she was ours.

When I finally broke away, she caught my bottom lip between her teeth and tugged before letting go. “That is what you did when you saw me.” Her voice was playful. “Except for the grumping after.”

“Hmm. Smart of me. No more grumping, though.” I trailed the edge of my finger along her jaw and down her neck, and Diego dipped his head to kiss along the same path.

Voices carried in from a few meters away. We weren't isolated here. If anyone cared to stop and stare, even though our actions could be hidden from the street, it would be obvious what we were doing.

Diego worked his fingers on the hand furthest from the street, slowly inching up the fabric of Carly's flowing skirt, until one of her thighs was exposed.

“What are you doing?” Carly asked with a laugh.

“If you don't know that by now, we have a problem. Do you need an anatomy lesson?” I asked, and dragged a thumb over her bottom lip. “This is your mouth.”

Diego kissed along a slender curve. “This is your neck.”

I slid a hand up her stomach, making sure my actions were shielded from the traffic, and cupped her breast. “This is your ___”

“Thank you, Doctors.” Carly caught my hand, but didn't push me away.

“We haven't seen you for a month.” A hint of angst and longing bled into Diego's voice. “You can't expect us to keep our hands to ourselves forever.” His hand disappeared under her skirt.

Carly shifted her weight, and Diego's knuckles brushed my hip as he glided his hand closer to her core.

“In a dark alley?” Her voice grew husky. “You sure know how to woo a girl.”

“No girls here.” I moved one hand to join Diego’s, and moved further, to slip a finger under the edge of lace near her pussy. “Only a stunning, brilliant, irresistible woman.” I teased along the crotch, letting the outside edge of my finger brush her damn, hot pussy. “We can stop if you want.”

“I didn’t say that.” The way Carly moved her leg gave me better access to my target.

She was already slick, and my fingers slipped easily inside her. Her gasp at the penetration was fuel on an already raging fire, tugging at my erection until I was so hard it ached. I pumped in and out of her, loving the expressions that flashed across her face, while Diego kneaded her breast.

Her soft whimpers became punctuated gasps. I couldn’t pull my gaze from her beauty. When she reached down and covered my hand, my cock almost busted through my zipper. She moved my touch higher, to her clit, and gasped, *Harder*.

I wanted to pin her to the wall, hitch her skirt over her hips, and fuck her until the entire city could hear her scream in pleasure. She felt incredible writhing between us. The sounds that tore from her chest were delicacies. I teased her clit, tracing circles and pressing in according to the way she shifted her weight, until her nails were digging into my arm.

“Oh, *fuck*.” She repeated the phrase over and over, and it became meaningless. She bit her lip when she came, her body swaying with pleasure until she jerked away from my touch with a shudder.

I eased off slowly, to let her catch her breath, and Diego and I held her upright. Before I could pull my hand away completely, Carly caught my wrist.

She held my gaze as she drew my slick fingers into her mouth one at a time, swirled her tongue around each pad, and licked me clean of her juices.

“Dessert,” she said with a smirk when she let go of me.

Fuck me.

We took a moment to make sure her dress was straightened out again.

As we resumed the walk home, my erection dug into my zipper. I tried to be subtle about adjusting myself. This stroll was going to be uncomfortable, and I didn't regret a single second of what we'd done.

It seemed like an eternity before we reached the apartment, despite it only being another ten or so minutes. We were barely inside, door locked behind us, before Diego was dragging down the zipper on Carly's dress. We kicked off our shoes and Carly stepped out of hers as if they were live, offensive creatures.

She pressed a hand to my chest before I could pull her body to mine. “No condoms.” Her request was breathless and desperate. “If you're okay with that.”

“So okay with it.”

“Same,” Diego chimed in.

And then we were all kissing. Lips roaming each other's, and hands exploring bodies. I lost track of who I could feel, and whose mouth was on me, as we fumbled toward the bedroom in a mess of limbs.

It wouldn't do to leave clothing laying all around the apartment, but in our room, Carly's dress hit the floor the instant we crossed the threshold. She shoved my jacket and

shirt from my shoulders. Helped Diego push his trousers to the ground.

When naked flesh met naked flesh, my mind threatened to combust. I'd step back and admire the sight in front of me—both of them—but I needed to feel more of her. Of him.

Carly pressed her full body to mine, her breasts molding to my chest and her pussy teasing my cock. She nudged me toward the bed, and I fell back with little prompting.

Watching her on her knees, straddling me, crawling up my body, sent my anticipation to join my sky-high adoration.

The sex was fun, incredible, but it wouldn't be the same if it was with anyone but the two of them. Carly belonged with us. She was the perfect fit for us. My life with Diego was complete before, but with Carly...

She was like an upgrade. A light ganache drizzled on a perfectly balanced dish.

I pushed myself onto my elbows to claim her mouth. To remind her that she was ours.

To seal this moment of perfection into my heart forever.

early

I'D ALMOST MISSED out on this. Almost walked away, given it up. The weeks it took me to figure things out were nothing in the grand scheme of life, but for this, they could've cost me the wonderful future that spread out before me.

But I was here now, and my heart was filled to bursting that I was back with Raul and Diego.

I pulled away from Raul's kiss, and drew my body down his again. One of my breasts brushed his cock, sending a zing through me and drawing a groan from him. I wrapped my fingers loosely around his shaft, and traced my tongue over the head, relishing the way he shuddered at my touch.

When I took his cock in my mouth, I felt his shudder of pleasure through my entire body. I sighed against his skin when he gripped my hair tight enough to pull, and set the pace.

Diego brushed light fingers along the inside of my thigh, from behind, and I moaned, never letting up on my attention to Raul. Which made him fuck my face faster. Harder.

The combination of everything pulled me deeper into the moment and my arousal.

And then Diego licked along my slit. *Oh, fuck*, that felt incredible. I was supposed to be the one giving pleasure, but

once again I was trapped in the most delicious way between these men.

Diego dove his tongue inside me, temporarily distracting me from Raul, licking my pussy like I really was dessert. He glided his fingers forward to tease my clit, while he devoured my juices and drew cries of desire from me.

I lost myself in all of it. Every sensation. Each touch and lick. The world grayed behind my eyelids and then exploded in a galaxy of stars when I came. This was all-consuming.

I lowered my head to return to my own task, and Raul stopped me. Finger under my chin, he tilted my face up to meet my gaze. “Don’t get me wrong. I love your mouth wrapped around my cock, but I want to be inside you.” His voice was heavy and his accent stronger than normal, and the blend was exotically delicious.

Sliding my way back up Raul’s body was an exercise in patience—pretending I had any, to test the limits of his. When my hips drew within his arm’s reach, he grabbed them and yanked me closer, until my core hovered over his shaft. He continued to dig his fingers into my skin with one hand, in a way that tantalized and screamed *mine*, and fisted his cock with the other hand.

He thrust up, penetrating and impaling me, and I gasped at the sensation of being spread out.

Teasing time was over. He felt too good buried deep. I lowered myself, and settled in, rocking gently, enjoying the sensation of being filled.

“*Christ* you feel good.” Raul’s appreciation washed over me. He slipped his hands to my ass, then glided up my back, pulling me into him.

It was difficult to move at this angle, but my body pressed against his, heat and electricity flowing between every point of contact, was a worthwhile exchange.

He moved his palms back down, and spread my ass cheeks.

Realization rocketed through me, and my desire and anticipation cranked. When Diego drew a slippery, lube-covered finger along my rear entrance, their intentions were confirmed.

“I don’t think Diego’s going to fit back there.” I kept my tone light. “I mean, I’d like it if he did...” In fact, every bit of me tingled at the thought.

Diego leaned in, his weight pressing me more tightly between them, and kissed the edge of my ear. “I’ll be gentle,” he whispered. “And you can stop me if it’s too much.”

“Okay.” Like I was going to need any more convincing than that.

When Diego placed the head of his cock against my back door, my entire body tensed.

“Hey.” Raul rested his palm on my cheek and held my attention. “Eyes on me, *Gattina*.” He slipped his hand to the base of my neck. “Think about how good this all feels.” He traced a thumb along the more sensitive bits of skin, where neck met head met ear.

It was easy to focus on his voice. His touch. To tell myself to relax as Diego slipped inside me, stretched me out, one agonizing inch at a time. The comfort didn’t only come from the sensations, though *fuck* those were incredible. I was pinned between two men I loved and adored, who felt the same about me.

There was an eroticism attached to that I thought I'd never feel.

And then Diego was inside me as well. I could even describe how it felt, being filled by both of them, beyond *incredible*. We sat there for a moment, peace and adoration wrapping around us, none of us moving or speaking.

When they started rocking in time with each other, it was almost too much. *Almost*. I fell into the motion quickly, peace shifting to mounting arousal. Diego dropped kisses along my upper back shoulders, and Raul teased my breast, pulling one nipple into his mouth to suck and nibble.

I couldn't pick one sensation to focus on, so I let them all flow through me. Desire built inside me, surging in lapping waves, growing stronger with each bit of attention lavished on me.

When climax tore through me, it caught me off-guard. Sliding in, growing to crescendo in a heartbeat, and stealing my breath and my thoughts.

The only thing I knew was ecstasy. The only thing I felt was *them*. Nothing else existed except the rapture they filled me with.

I was loosely aware of Raul's grunts growing louder. More punctuated. Of Diego's touch getting rougher. More insistent.

And I knew when each of them came, spilling inside me, but it was a sensation more than a realization. Their pleasure flowed with mine, hitting yet another peak, before slipping away slowly.

I sank onto Raul's chest, my ear near his heart, the beat hammering in time with mine. I should roll off him, but my

legs were done, and the only thought I could hold onto was *yummy*.

When he and Diego slid out of me, my body both relaxed, and whimpered for the contact, the connection, to come back. Diego kissed up my spine, sending shivers of contentment through me, and brushed the hair off the back of my neck, to continue gliding his lips up to my ear.

Raul trailed his fingers along my scalp. “*Gattina*, I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too.” I was out of pretty words. All I had was potent emotion. The kind that could destroy or heal, and had mended my heart. I forced myself to stop squishing Raul, and rolled to the side. Diego was so tender cleaning me up, it was its own experience in arousal.

And then we were all lying next to each other, me trapped between the two of them.

So I won’t leave again.

The thought was brief, but enough to make me wince. I wasn’t going anywhere.

Diego pulled me into him and wrapped his arms around my waist, leaving me facing Raul.

“Now that the frantic *need to fuck* feeling is faded a *little*,” Raul said, “we need details. What’s going on? What changed? How’d we get so lucky to keep you?”

I barely remembered what I’d already told them, so I might as well start somewhere near the beginning. “The partners have been talking for a while about opening a European branch. They’ve offered me a position helping to bring it up to speed, and then staying on. I’ll still be doing appraisals all

over the world, though not nearly as many, and this will be my new home base.”

“I like the sound of that.” Diego traced a lazy thumb in circles on my hip.

Raul brushed my hair off my forehead. “Same.”

“Me three. Obviously.”

We talked for hours about everything and nothing. It was as if I’d always been here, but the aches inside, the fear that nearly made me surrender this, reminded me not to take it for granted. I was so fucking lucky to have found this.

I woke up the next morning to a distant shout of, “Daddy. Daddy. Carly.”

Eloise was home. I didn’t remember a day I’d ever been happy to wake up to a screaming child, but this morning her happy yells were musical.

Raul groaned and pushed himself upright. “I’ll go take care of her and say *hi* to Mom.” He gave us both quick kisses, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, pulled on a pair of sweats, and wandered from the room.

Diego brushed his lips over my shoulder. “This is morning at our house. Still up for spending more time with us?”

“You bet your ass I am.”

He sat up and pulled me with him. “You probably need clothes, though.”

Right. That seemed reasonable. “I could put the dress back on. Eloise liked it.”

“Eloise loved it,” Diego said. “But do you want to be wearing that all morning?”

Probably not. “What do you suggest?”

Climbing from the bed, Diego padded to the walk-in closet in the far wall, and vanished inside. A moment later he returned with a pair of boxers, a button-down shirt, and a belt.

His shirt hung halfway down to my knees, making it long enough to cover the boxers. I belted it all in place and checked myself in the full-length mirror. “I’d be a hit on Paris runways, I’m sure of it.”

He gripped my hips from behind. “They can’t have you.”

Fair enough.

Diego dressed as well, and we headed into the living room. Raul’s mother was already gone—he said she’d had places to be.

The instant Eloise saw me, she ran up to me and gave me a tight hug. I squeezed her back, relishing the ping in my chest.

“Hey. I don’t get one of those?” Diego sounded mock-offended.

Eloise rolled her eyes. “I see you every day, Daddy. It’s not a big deal.”

Ouch.

“Don’t feel too bad. I didn’t get one either,” Raul said.

The huff Eloise let out was Oscar worthy. “*Fine*. Hugs for Daddies.” She was smiling despite the theatrics, and gave each of them a tight hug.

This was such an incredible feeling. I’d had this kind of closeness with my brother and sister, with our parents, when we were younger. The dynamic was different, but the feeling

of love in the air was so similar. But we'd all grown up, gone our separate ways...

I still loved Megan and Jeremy. Mom and Dad. But we had our own lives. I wasn't replacing them, I was simply expanding my circle of affection. And now I was part of this family, too. Part of something bigger.

"What should we have for breakfast?" Raul asked as we moved into the kitchen.

Eloise grabbed my hand. "Carly should make breakfast."

Diego settled into a chair at the table. "Carly is a guest."

"Carly isn't a guest, she's Mommy."

I didn't have the desire to correct her. "I don't really make breakfast. The only things I know how to cook are eggs and chocolate chip pancakes."

The way Eloise wrinkled her nose was so much like Raul when he was considering something. "Chocolate chips are not for breakfast," she said. "What are pancakes?"

"They are a thing that is amazing with chocolate chips. I can show you." I moved toward Raul.

Diego grabbed my wrist. "You're not cooking. You're our guest."

"She's family." Raul pulled me free and the rest of the way into the kitchen. "And I'll help."

That sounded awkward and embarrassing. "You're a world class chef. I'm a short order cook who tosses whatever's in the fridge into a frying pan."

"I'll be your sous chef. You're in charge, just tell me what to do."

I eyed Raul suspiciously. It still sounded like a mistake to let him see how scattered I was when it came to cooking, but I was willing to give it a try. Besides, he probably knew how Eloise liked her eggs, and that would keep us from having a repeat of the peanut butter and jelly incident.

Cooking with Raul turned out to be more fun than I thought. We kept *accidentally* letting Eloise steal chocolate chips, and he was incredibly patient given the mess I made in his kitchen.

When we sat down to eat, everyone at the table was laughing. Joking.

Eloise declared that chocolate chip pancakes were the best food ever, and I couldn't help but beam.

This was what I wanted long term. I looked at the three other faces around the table, and I saw my future. Family. Food. Fun. Love. These amazing men and their little girl...

This was more perfect than I'd ever dared hope for, and it was all mine.

THANK you for traveling around the world, and falling in love with Carly, Diego, and Raul.

Kandace, Joystick, and Elijah are next, in [THE EXCEPTION](#). Kandace wants to live life, but she's torn between fun and responsibility. A one-night stand in Italy, with the sexy, tattooed Joystick, seems like the perfect way to let loose, but just for one night.

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Judith knew it would be when she clawed her way up, trading away favors and any personal life to get to where she is today—the head of the hottest new video game company in the industry.

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And there are far worse things Judith could be doing than pretending to be Dom's fiancée.

When the fake kisses with Dominic start to feel real, she realizes there's something missing in her life. Worse, she's starting to realize she never should've let Xander get away.

But the three of them together will bring everything they've worked for toppling down around them. There's no way love is worth that kind of sacrifice.

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